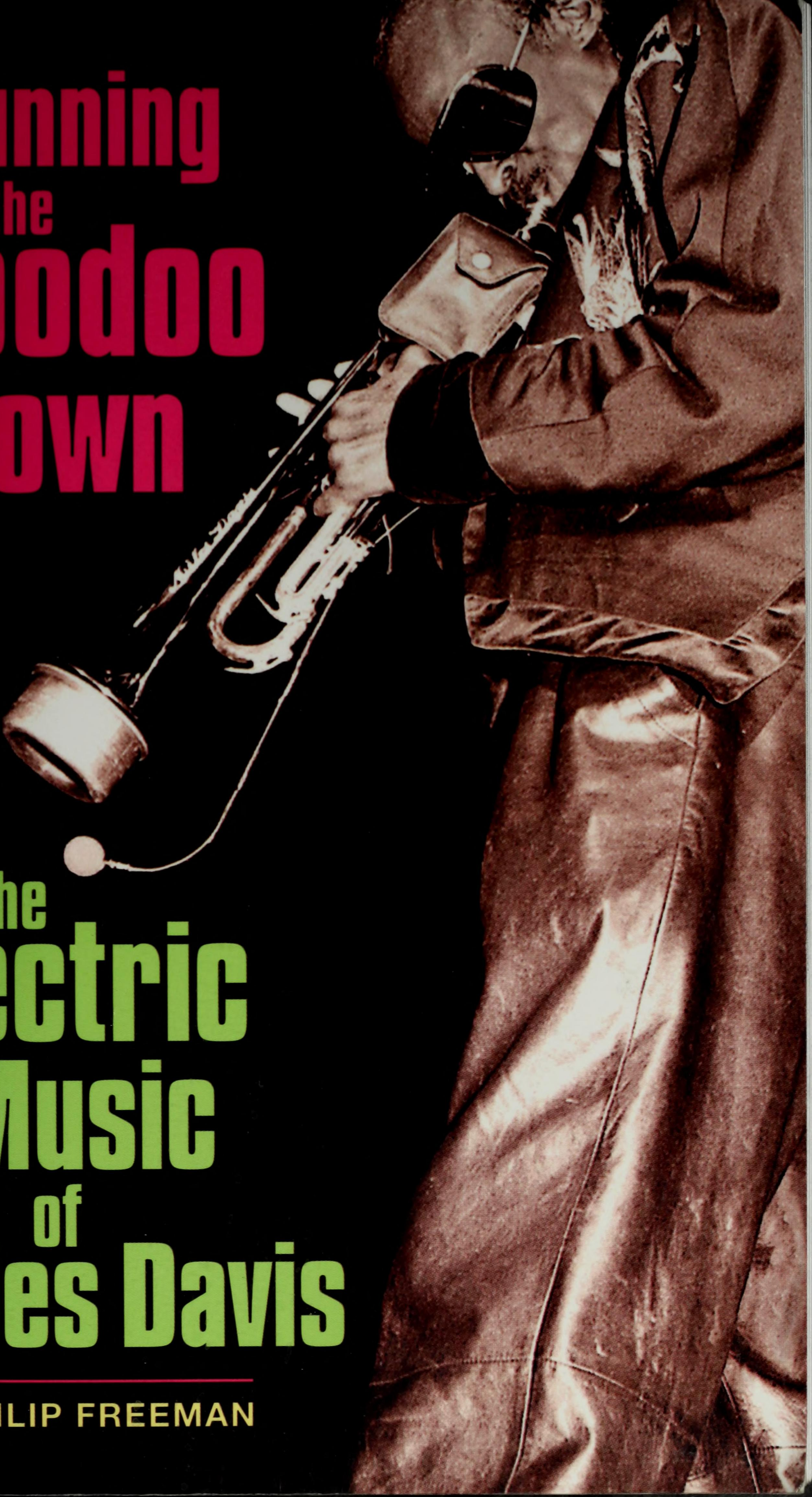
Running the Voodoo Down



The Electric Music of Miles Davis

PHILIP FREEMAN

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RUNNING THE VOODOO DOWN

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THE ELECTRIC MUSIC OF MILES DAVIS

Philip Freeman

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For Izalia, who prefers Thelonious Monk

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When I hear jazz musicians today playing all those same licks we used to play so long ago, I feel sad for them. I mean, it's like going to bed with a real old person who even smells real old . . . I like contemporary stuff. I have to always be on the cutting edge of things because that's just the way I am and have always been.

—Miles Davis, 1989

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INTRODUCTION

EVERYONE HAS THEIR OWN MILES. I'm thirty-two years old as I write this, and I discovered Miles in 1987. I read about *Kind of Blue* and *Bitches Brew* in *Rolling Stone*, so I bought them. I loved the former and hated the latter, but I knew right away that I was destined to spend a significant amount of time and money on Miles Davis albums.

I didn't bother reading a biography or anything like it. Instead, I leapt from album to album based solely on what my small-town record store had in stock. I'd soon heard *Agharta*, *Pangaea*, and *Tutu*. When I bought a CD, I didn't care what the recording date was; I didn't think about any of them as steps forward from the others. I wasn't trying to build a chronological collection, I was just listening to records that were blasting my head wide open, the same as the Public Enemy, Ice-T, Motörhead, and Slayer albums I loved.

I read about *On the Corner* in the Lester Bangs anthology *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*, and decided I had to own it. The album wasn't available on CD in America. I settled for vinyl, and was blown away by what I heard. Even after soaking in the fury of *Agharta* and *Pangaea*, and the roiling storm clouds of *Bitches Brew*, I wasn't prepared for the jagged, off-kilter funk, the Indian percussion and drones, the loops and tape slices, of *On the Corner*. Eventually, I bought it on CD—a British import that cost me $25. (A Japanese edition of *Dark Magus* cost me $40 in 1991.) I've been listening to *On the Corner* for fifteen years at this writing, and I hear something new every time. It's my favorite Miles album, and I suspect it will always be.

Although I hadn't read much about Miles Davis's life for the first few years that I'd been absorbing his music, I did eventually get around to doing so. I read his autobiography *Miles*, and Jack Chambers's *Milestones*, in the early 1990s. More importantly, I read Greg Tate's essay "The Electric Miles (Parts 1 and 2)" in his book *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*. It was completely different from everything I'd read before.

Unlike Chambers, Tate loved some of the same albums I did, and considered them worthy of in-depth analysis. And he was into many other artists I admired: Prince, the Bad Brains, the writer William Gibson. I wasn't a writer yet, but I knew I wanted to be one, and every writer, no matter

how iconoclastic a pose is struck in print, wants to believe he or she isn't alone out there. Reading Tate, I learned that somebody else knew the same Miles I did.

Tate's writing was important on another level: I realized that criticism was more than 200- or 300-word record reviews. It was possible to write about musicians, at length, without quoting them. I took that to heart when I decided to write this book. I interviewed a few musicians on whom I wanted to shine a particularly bright light. But in the main, I was guided by two general principles. The first was that Miles already had an autobiography, and more than enough biographies. The second was that it would be silly to interview everyone around Miles if I couldn't speak to the man himself. So *Running the Voodoo Down* is an extended work of criticism, albeit one based in fact.

Actually, it's a series of extended works of criticism. While I travel through Miles's career chronologically, I take a lot of side trips along the way. Miles didn't live in a bubble. None of us does, and the outside world influences everything we do. This is particularly true of artists. So I'm not just listing recording dates and personnel here. I'm talking about race, sex, politics—and other peoples' music besides Davis's. In order to accomplish this in the most efficient and comprehensible manner, I've structured this book more as a series of linked essays than as a solid, front-to-back narrative. Multiple subjects, multiple angles, treated separately and then bound together.

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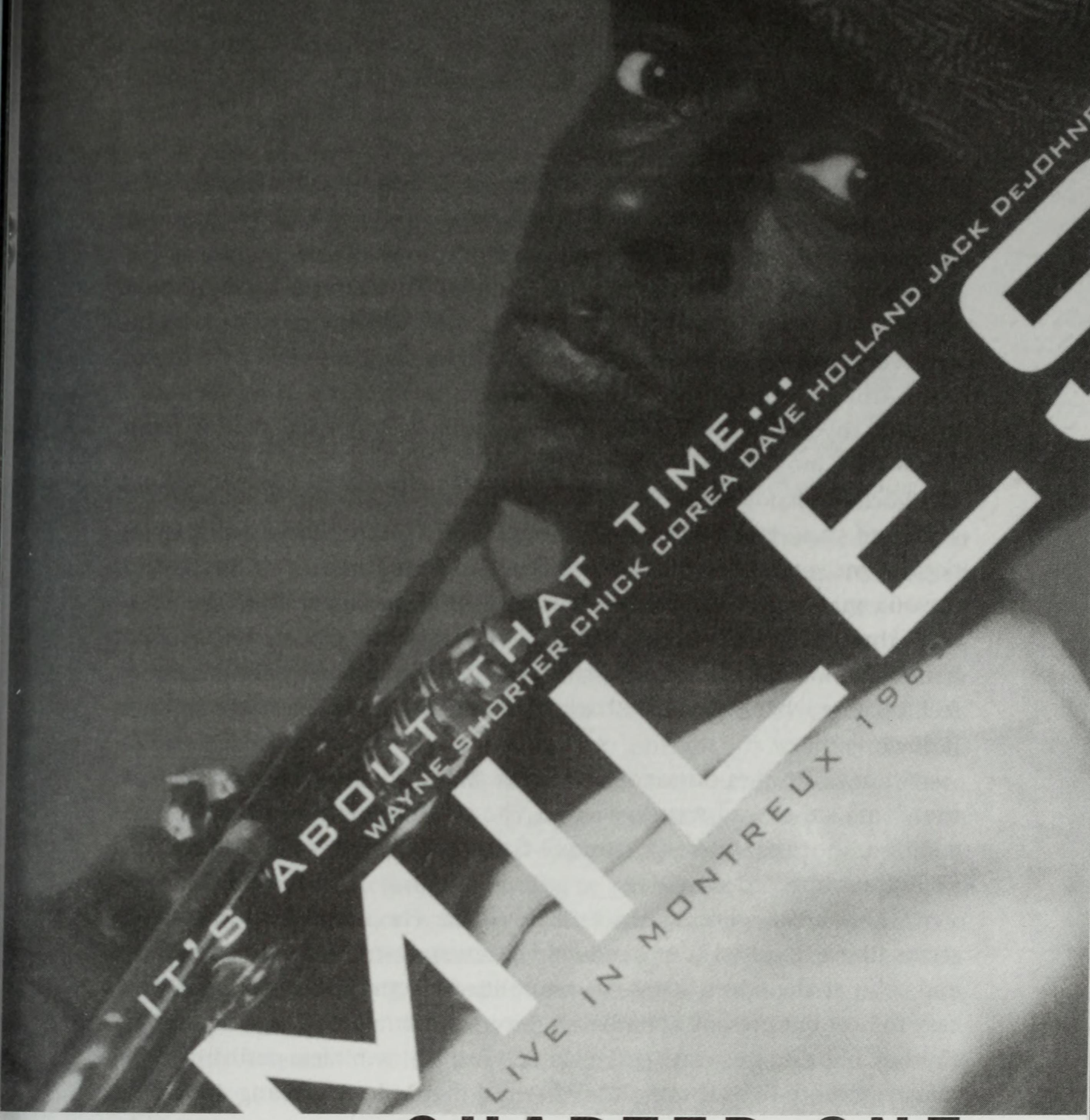


CHAPTER ONE

ELECTRICITY

IT STARTS WITH THE DRUM, the oldest instrument—a huge whacking snare and a cymbal that slashes like a scimitar. It's Al Foster behind the kit, and he can swing when he wants to, but at this moment it's like he's inventing thrash metal and calling it jazz. Two seconds later the rest of the band comes in, and it's

like a bomb goes off under your couch. It's a one-chord funk-rock vamp, whamming out of the speakers like a pitching machine hurling chunks of asphalt.

Guitarists Reggie Lucas and Pete Cosey have been in the band for more than a year. They've defined their roles, and their interaction is highly evolved, intuitive, and seamless. On this night, they're joined by a mysterious African: Dominique Gaumont, brought onstage by Miles without a word to anyone, throwing him into the sonic whirlpool to sink or swim. The world's most nightmarish audition.

Michael Henderson's bass is a tectonic rumble, shifting the sound forward and back. He's playing trance music, he's playing funk, he's playing both at once and everything in between, and once you hear five seconds of it, you could listen forever. You could float on those thick, throbbing, hypnotic rhythms like a brain in a vat. He's been with Miles since 1970. All his bandmates know they can go as far out as they need to, play anything they feel, because when they come back Henderson will be right there, holding it down.

Sonny Fortune's on saxophone. He's being shadowed by a new face, too. Some kid named Azar Lawrence. The second newbie doesn't pass the audition, though. Unlike Dominique Gaumont, he never appears again in Miles Davis's recorded catalog.

Mtume's the voice of Africa in the band. He plays congas and what seems like a hundred tiny hand-held percussion implements. They rattle and echo at the edges of the over-amplified electronic storm, not always easy to hear but present nonetheless. Mtume softens the savage funk-metal rhythm, blurring the edges and making it just a little bit less punishing. The massive twenty-five-minute slabs of sound that Miles is dishing out would be a lot harder to take without him.

Miles is the center of it all. The eye of the storm. He's controlling the action a little, but not too much. Mostly, he's just making it happen—firing the starter's pistol and standing back, ready to step in where and when he's needed. He's heard first on organ, not on trumpet. He blasts chords in time with the guitarists' jagged stabs, hitting the keys like he's playing with his elbows or his feet. When he does pick up the horn, a minute or maybe two into the piece, it's to play a single staccato riff, over and over. It's a harsh, raw sound. He's spitting the notes out like poison. Miles is playing like a kid in his twenties, not a man in his forties and his fourth decade on the bandstand.

This is a physical music, the sound of someone with something to prove. It punches you in the gut, knocks the breath from your lungs. This is *Dark Magus*, the sound of Miles Davis onstage at Carnegie Hall in New York.

More specifically, it's the sound of Miles Davis on March 29, 1974. Just like *Agharta* and *Pangaea* were the sound of Miles Davis on February 1, 1975, and *In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall* was the sound of Miles Davis on September 29, 1972. In the liner notes to the CD reissue of *In Concert*, drummer Bobby Previte writes,

> *For us, on the outside, it has a name—"Miles Davis in Concert"—but to a man like Miles, I'm sure it was simply another day, another run through the horn. Another chance to get it right. And another glance over the shoulder at failure in the most glorious, the most Faulknerian sense.*

All improvised music is lived in the moment, but in the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, Miles took that concept to unprecedented extremes. Each piece the 1970s bands performed was new. It might be initiated by some tiny snippet of melody, or one of those massive, Zenlike Henderson basslines. But once Davis knew everybody onstage was more or less on the same page, all bets were off. The version of "Right Off" on *Agharta*, retitled simply "Theme from Jack Johnson," is so different from the version on the album *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* that it could have been called anything. On the *Isle of Wight* compilation, Miles's contribution actually *is* titled "Call It Anything." That can be viewed as a cynical joke, something you can picture him rasping to Teo Macero as he leaves the studio to race his Ferrari down the West Side Highway, or it can be understood for what it is: a three-word phrase that illuminates nearly a decade of music-making. Call it anything, because at bottom, it's all music. One piece, one cut from one album, is like a shaving from an iceberg.

Many listeners have never quite managed to bridge the gap between Miles's final acoustic quintet (with saxophonist Wayne Shorter, pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Ron Carter, and drummer Tony Williams) and the roiling roar of the 1970s concerts. The phrase "Miles's last great quintet" appears too often as a description of the Shorter/Hancock/Carter/Williams band. It doesn't matter that the later bands often had seven or more members. The crucial distinction being made isn't one of size. The implication, rather, is that nothing Davis did after disbanding that group, in 1968, could truly be described as great.

Miles Davis spent just under fifty years on the bandstand. He began his career as a young bebopper, playing with Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, but that didn't satisfy him for long. The music he made as a leader was more meditative and more concerned with space. The frenetic spirals of notes that characterized so much of the music of the late 1940s and early 1950s—not only Parker and Gillespie, but Art Tatum and Bud Powell as well—disappeared from Davis's work. He became one of jazz's most lyrical

and biting players, his use of the close-miked Harmon mute enhancing his mastery of the ballad.

From the 1949 *Birth of the Cool* sessions to his last totally acoustic recordings in 1967, Miles did what sounded right to him. This encompassed everything from orchestral arrangements to the quintets and sextets that made him one of jazz's brightest stars. These were in many ways the golden years, the albums and concerts that yielded what lots of critics and fans called Davis's finest music, and that secured his artistic legacy.

There's no denying the beauty of Miles's best acoustic work. The five albums recorded for Prestige with his first major quintet—John Coltrane on tenor saxophone, Red Garland on piano, Paul Chambers on bass, and Philly Joe Jones on drums—and his Columbia debut, *'Round About Midnight*, documented the arrival of a major post-bebop voice. *Milestones* added to Davis's growing reputation, and his 1959 masterpiece, *Kind of Blue,* made him one of the most famous jazz musicians in the world. It was a massive success by jazz standards, selling millions of copies since its release and earning frequent citations as the ideal starting point for newcomers to the music.

But in the minds of many critics and fans, Miles's most innovative acoustic music was made with the final quintet. From 1965 to 1967, Miles led that group through five studio albums and live recordings from Berlin and Chicago, expanding their improvisatory range practically gig by gig. Toward the end, they were one of the most forward-looking groups in jazz, playing music that blurred the line between hard bop and the free blowing of the avant-garde. The gigs were miles ahead (no pun intended) of even the very latest album; Columbia was forever playing catch-up with Davis in the 1960s. They were so ahead of their time that their music is still being studied today.

But the quintet years are far from the end of the story. Miles played acoustic-based jazz from at least 1945 to 1967, but he began experimenting with electric instruments at the tail end of that year, building a bridge to his new soundworld on the quintet's final albums. And though he brought electronics in cautiously and incrementally, they dominated his work from that point until his death in 1991. Half of Miles Davis's professional life was spent playing electric music. The one constant in his music, and his life, was forward motion, restless and sharklike. When he plugged in, the 1991 Montreux concert at which he performed orchestral material from the late 1950s notwithstanding, it was for good. All lives are one-way journeys, but Miles's was emphatically so.

The electric albums contain much of Miles's most innovative work. Wayne Shorter said of his years with the electric band—roughly 1968 to 1970—that there was "just more courage involved" with that music than with earlier records. Miles made some widely quoted comments of his own

about abandoning the word "jazz" because it was too limiting, verging on pejorative. This is nothing but the simple truth.

Miles took a fair amount of input from players in his bands, and friends, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, drummer Tony Williams and then-wife Betty Mabry in particular. But changes to his sound were his idea. Herbie Hancock didn't know he'd be playing the Fender Rhodes electric keyboard on a 1967 session until he walked into the studio and asked Miles where the piano was. Miles's understanding of the music of the 1960s, and the technology involved in its creation, was better than that of any jazz musician of his generation, and many of the generation after.

Davis completely revamped his own playing style when he went electric. The most obvious change was his adoption of the wah-wah pedal, a device employed by guitarists to create a sound somewhat akin to a distorted slide. Miles used it to transform his horn into any number of things: a crying baby, a mirage-like shimmer of sound, even something like a combination squeak and machine gun. In the simplest sense, the sounds available through the wah-wah pedal were just electronic versions of effects achieved by earlier trumpeters with plunger mutes, but amplification granted sustain, volume, and an unexpected subtlety. Miles could make notes disappear as quickly as they passed his lips, then bring them back at full roar, just by pressing on a pedal. Just as he'd created his uniquely meditative style rather than compete in the bebop arms race, Davis turned a potential limitation into a powerful tool. The sound of the electronic trumpet became key to the new music he was creating.

Miles didn't employ the pedal heavily until the early 1970s, though. In his 1969 quintet with Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea, Dave Holland, and Jack DeJohnette (a band that was never properly documented in the studio), he was playing mostly through an open horn, only occasionally turning to the Harmon mute. This band, and the ones immediately after, allowed Davis to be more emotionally naked than he would be for some time afterward. Because he was feeling his way into new territory and playing with sidemen with whom he was less familiar, these early electric sessions and gigs found Miles simplifying his lines dramatically. He seemed to prefer pursuing moods, creating a single large composition out of melodic snippets, to playing discrete tunes with pauses for applause between them. Indeed, he described this change in detail in his 1989 autobiography, saying,

> *When I started playing against that new rhythm—synthesizers and guitars and all that new stuff—first I had to get used to it. At first there was no feeling because I was used to the old way of playing things like with Bird and Trane. Playing the new shit was a gradual process. You just don't stop playing the way you used to play. You don't hear the sound at*

first. It takes time. When you do hear the new sound, it's like a rush, but a slow rush. In the new music, before you know it, you have played four or five minutes, which is a long time. But you don't have to blast because you've got an amplifier. And the smoother you play a trumpet, the more it sounds like a trumpet when you amplify it. It's like mixing paint; with too many colors you get nothing but mud. An amplified trumpet doesn't sound good when you play real fast. So I learned to play two-bar phrases, and that's where I was going with my music. It was exciting because I was learning as I was doing it, just like when I had Herbie and Wayne and Ron and Tony in my band. Only this time it was coming from me and that made me feel real good.

On *Bitches Brew* and the live albums *At Fillmore* and *Black Beauty*, Davis's solos are constructed out of brief, sharp phrases, sometimes containing no more than two or three notes. His technique is more percussive than lyrical. He chops his lines off and begins again, as though each new thought must first banish the one that preceded it. Melodies are present, and identifiable, but the band is driven by the drums and the battling keyboards of Keith Jarrett and Chick Corea. It's a scorched-earth approach, over which Miles and his nearly logorrheic saxophonist of the time, Steve Grossman, struggle for dominance in extremely different voices.

Miles revolutionized jazz composition during these years. In partnership with producer Teo Macero, he transformed amorphous jam sessions into epic poems, filled with bluster and bravado but also a tender, plangent beauty. Entire sections of pieces were sliced and repeated, allowing compositions like "Pharaoh's Dance," the opening cut on *Bitches Brew*, to build, then start again, until the suspense becomes overwhelming and Miles's entrance provides ecstatic release. The duo also worked to subvert the idea that pieces should have a beginning, middle, and end. The first section of "In a Silent Way/It's About That Time," from *In a Silent Way*, repeats at the end of the piece, turning the whole thing into a loop years before DJs began making "breaks" into the foundation of hip-hop tracks.

When they felt like it, the pair also mustered their mastery of the studio to create a snarling, oppressive atmosphere. The nearly side-long medley that opens 1972's *On the Corner* seems to hover in place like a radioactive cloud surrounding the listener's head. Macero's post-production techniques of layering, echo and drop-outs had antecedents in dub reggae, and (again) showed up later in hip-hop.

Miles's ears were wide open during these years. He took ideas from anywhere and everywhere, finding exactly the people he required to play what he wanted to hear. Though Miles and Macero were in full command of the

recording studio, and could sculpt fantastic albums from the most chaotic and apparently formless sessions, the musicians who passed through Davis's employ between 1971 and 1975 gave him a lot to work with. This was particularly true of bassist Michael Henderson. Davis could not have played the Sly Stone–influenced music in his head with jazz-rooted bandmembers like Dave Holland and Keith Jarrett. The recruitment of a former Motown player was both necessary and inspired. Alongside Al Foster, Henderson anchored the most expansive, adventurous jams Miles (or anyone) ever released. He laid the foundation of the one-world acid funk of *Agharta* and *Pangaea*, but he was also the heart of "He Loved Him Madly," a desolate eulogy for Duke Ellington released on 1974's *Get Up With It*.

It's easy to understand why conservative jazz critics turned their backs on albums like *On the Corner* and *Get Up With It*. Miles really wasn't playing *jazz* any longer. He was playing *music*, with no limitations, of genre or any other kind. Davis's journey through electricity and its possibilities was marked by so many phases, and so many different sounds, that the two-word phrase "electric Miles" is laughably inadequate. The tentative experiments of 1968, heard on *Miles in the Sky*, and *Water Babies*, are stepping stones to the oceanic washes of *In a Silent Way* and the gathering storms of *Bitches Brew*, recorded only a year later. But live recordings—*Black Beauty*, *At Fillmore*, and *It's About That Time*, among others—provide an entirely different view of Miles's activities at the time. Stripped of the overdubs that shaped the studio recordings, these document a squalling, roaring *band*, working out Miles's new ideas and their own in real time, in front of packed rock-club and festival audiences—the audiences that would make up the majority of Davis's listeners from 1969 to 1975.

Miles's transition into his new modes wasn't precipitous, though; it was gradual. The Jazz Door CD *It's About That Time . . .* documents a concert at Juan-les-Pins, France, on July 25, 1969. It feels like a considered attempt to blend old and new, not a headlong leap into electronics. The 1969 quintet's music is wild and often seemingly unfettered, but the pieces they're performing are hardly the one-chord jams of the early 1970s. Instead, they're adaptations of material that had been part of Miles's live repertoire for, in some cases, nearly fifteen years at that point. "Milestones," "'Round About Midnight," "I Fall in Love Too Easily," and traditional set-closer "The Theme" (in this case combined with "Sanctuary") are all performed, albeit in versions that sound radically different from any heard before.

"Milestones" is a perfect example of this group's take on standards. Miles introduces the nearly fourteen-minute piece. He plays the first twelve notes of the piece's thirteen-note theme, but in place of the last note, there's only silence, which Chick Corea leaps to fill, with humming science-fiction

squiggles. Beneath Miles's opening solo, Corea's electric piano sounds alternately like an underwater Hammond B-3 and a set of vibes being played inside an aluminum garden shed.

Davis's own playing is exquisitely rich and full. He sticks to the trumpet's lower-middle range, often sounding like a flügelhorn. There are occasional crescendos, but for the most part he sticks close to the melodies, or plays the blues. Behind him, Holland and DeJohnette keep the beat steady and swinging.

Around four minutes into the piece, Wayne Shorter begins his solo, with occasional interjections from Corea. He heads quickly into high-speed flurry-of-notes territory. His role with Miles had always been to provide a counterpoint, hectoring when the trumpeter whispered, playing a dozen or more notes for every two his boss offered. This was what Miles liked in a saxophonist, and Shorter found it a hard invitation to resist.

Corea's solo is extravagantly weird, almost reaching the fever pitch of Sun Ra's synthesizer experiments on the twin *Solar-Myth Approach* albums a year later. Toward the end, he brings himself back to earth, rejoining Holland and DeJohnette in the most overtly jazz-rock moments of the piece; the trio sound almost like a much more talented Doors for a few distressing seconds.

Miles quickly restates the main melody, again chopping off the last note of the horn line so Corea can fill in on squiggles. He's still playing in the lower registers of the trumpet, with DeJohnette rising slowly behind him on each line, crashing the cymbals like a shark breaking the surface of the sea. The song concludes with Davis and Corea seeming to battle for space, the keyboardist growing louder and wilder behind the trumpeter's final solo choruses. Then, it's over, and without a break, Miles launches the band into "Footprints."

The whole sixty-three-minute concert is a master class in controlled energy. The periodic outbursts of free playing from everyone save the elegantly restrained Holland only serve to emphasize the ensemble's deep connections to one another. There are times when this band ventures into utterly free territory, but Davis pulls them back from the improvisational brink at will throughout the set. And he's in top form, playing through an open horn for almost the whole show. Melodies are stated concisely, and everyone's solos arise naturally and gracefully. Heard today, this recording feels like Davis offering "jazz" the fondest possible farewell, as he moves on to the next stage in his own musical development.

It would have been impossible to attempt a set like this one a few years later. The 1973–75 band could no more have made "'Round About Midnight" work onstage than they could have launched into a set of Hank Williams tunes. From a musical standpoint, they were the equals of those

who'd come before; Pete Cosey, in particular, was one of the greatest musicians Miles ever employed. But the music they were making was so divorced from all prior genre norms that to attempt a straight jazz tune between half-hour acid-funk jams would have seemed like they were parodying the old music.

The work Miles released between 1968 and 1971 represented a single extended phase of artistic development. He was feeling his way, finding his feet in this new sonic universe of amplifiers, ring modulators, and pedals. This era reached its natural endpoint at the various recording sessions that produced *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, a soundtrack that, as might have been expected, completely overshadowed the film with which it was coupled. Miles's bands had been dominated by keyboards—hardly surprising, since Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, and Herbie Hancock were the first, and sometimes only, electric musicians in Davis's employ in 1968 and even parts of 1969. But on the various *Jack Johnson*–related sessions between February and June 1970, their role was greatly diminished. The dominant sound of the ensemble became the gritty roar of John McLaughlin's electric guitar.

The white Englishman had contributed to *In a Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew*, and *Big Fun*. Miles loved what McLaughlin brought to the music and, though he couldn't quite get the guitarist to join the band fulltime, continued to book him for almost every session he called in early 1970. Thus, it was natural that McLaughlin's sound became the band's loudest voice on *Jack Johnson*. He was the first to solo, opening "Right Off" with flanged, hard-rock power chords over Billy Cobham's drums and Michael Henderson's massive, throbbing bassline.

Much of the material recorded during the *Jack Johnson* sessions remained unreleased for decades. A few tracks dribbled out on *Big Fun*, *Live-Evil*, and *Directions*, but a clutch of compositions lay in the vaults, including a series named for some of Miles's favorite boxers—"Ali," "Archie Moore," "Johnny Bratton," and "Sugar Ray," as well as alternate takes of "Willie Nelson" and the noisy, two-part epic "The Mask," among others. All told, the five-CD boxed set *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions*, released at the end of 2003, contained thirty-four previously unreleased tracks out of forty-two—an astonishing amount of music.

A Tribute to Jack Johnson demonstrated the growing influence on Miles of Sly Stone's funk grooves, and Jimi Hendrix's scorched-earth guitar. These overtly rock-derived sounds led Miles inexorably to the distorted blues of *Live-Evil*. That album was primarily a document of a specific event, a club gig at the Cellar Door in Washington, D.C. Again McLaughlin dominated the record, though he was not a regular member of the band at the time. Indeed, of the three nights at the Cellar Door, all taped by Columbia, only the last night featured the guitarist. Still, Miles chose to include only that

night's efforts on the album, a decision that is said to have annoyed some bandmembers, particularly keyboardist Keith Jarrett. (Listening to live recordings of that band without McLaughlin, like the two *What I Say* volumes on JMY, or the complete Cellar Door recordings, finally released in 2005, prove Jarrett's point to be valid. The band really *is* funkier, more together, and altogether a better unit without McLaughlin's interjections.)

Miles's music became more extreme as the 1970s rolled on, evolving inexorably from *Live-Evil*'s barbed funk to the savage, post-Hendrix grooves of the Tokyo concerts documented on *Agharta* and *Pangaea*. Naturally, these changes provoked correspondingly extreme reactions. The crowds got younger, and old-school jazz fans and critics—and even fellow musicians—who'd followed Miles's career for years became disillusioned, even angry with him.

Miles was changing his music so fast and so radically that, by the time they hit the streets, the studio albums were no longer an accurate reflection of what he was doing. *Bitches Brew*, for example, was released when Davis was touring with the Shorter/Corea/Holland/DeJohnette quintet described earlier. While some of the album's tunes made it into the onstage repertoire, the live versions were much more stripped down and harsh. The stylistic gap between studio recordings and live gigs only grew wider as the 1970s wore on. There's no better example of this than 1972's *On the Corner*.

The album was recorded over two days in the summer of 1972, with another day or two spent overdubbing. It's unique amid Miles's 1970s discography for being the only single album amid a sea of double (and mostly live) discs. *On the Corner* marked Davis's last trip into the studio with the idea of making a whole record until 1981. In the ensuing two years, sessions would be called with little or no thought as to where the resultant material would eventually be released. *Get Up With It* was culled from a half-dozen sessions between 1972 and 1974, and *Big Fun* featured four long tracks taped between 1969 and 1972.

Vestiges of the 1970–71 band's live sound lingered in *On the Corner*'s extended medleys, but its combination of free jazz, funk, Indian music, and up-to-the-minute studio technology created a thick, buzzing, disorienting sonic stew that alienated many. Critics loathed it. Many still do, one of Miles's biographers among them. It sold fairly well, though, and as the decades passed, the record became a legend, a test of one's commitment to sonic adventure, and a totem of a particular kind of cool. Today, *On the Corner*'s sonic innovations are echoed in dub, hip-hop, and avant-garde rock, including the work of Public Enemy, Techno Animal, and Bill Laswell.

After *On the Corner*, Miles took his music to the people in earnest, playing to sellout crowds in rock clubs and theaters, and at huge festivals. A recording of Miles's two-guitar septet from summer 1973—found in 2002's

mammoth, twenty-CD boxed set *The Complete Miles Davis at Montreux 1973–1991*—is a perfect example. It's a whirling ball of fire; as they would be on *Dark Magus* and *Agharta,* the band is in high gear from the first moment to the last. Miles launches one arpeggiated stream of notes after the next as the guitarists vamp behind him and soprano saxophonist Dave Liebman warms up for a scorching solo. The band plays two sets. The first consists of two long, untitled jams; the second features interpretations of two numbers, "Ife" and "Calypso Frelimo" (which would be released later on *Big Fun* and *Get Up With It,* respectively), and closes with another untitled jam.

The music, as it was on the four double live albums Miles released in the first half of the 1970s—*In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall, Dark Magus, Agharta,* and *Pangaea*—is a high-speed mix of funk, jazz and even heavy metal, with every player in the ensemble free to go as far afield as they wish. Al Foster's backbeat and Michael Henderson's bassline drive the music forward like a turbocharged tank. The guitarists go wild; Miles offers sharp blasts of trumpet and occasional, piercing organ chords. Saxophonist Liebman is probably the player most concerned with maintaining a link to jazz tradition: His solos sound free, but he's definitely not surrendering to the full-tilt fervor of the music the way the others are. He only lasted a little over a year in the band, and it's easy to hear why. In the years since, he's made comments in a variety of interviews that walk a careful tightrope between respect for Miles's innovations and his own sense of privilege at being asked to participate, and his obvious lack of comfort with the actual music being made.

Each of the aforementioned live albums documents a concert almost in its entirety, and while they all contain a few common melodies, the picture each paints of Miles's music is very different from that found on the others. *In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall,* for example, features reworkings of pieces Davis had recorded for *On the Corner* just three months earlier. It's a sparse set. Reggie Lucas is the only guitarist, and he's balanced by Cedric Lawson's electric piano and synthesizer and Khalil Balakrishna's electric sitar. The concert belongs to the rhythm section. Henderson, Foster, and percussionists Badal Roy and Mtume all contribute to the swirls of sound, herky-jerky funk rhythms mixing with Indian and African percussion accents.

Miles doesn't solo much, preferring to vamp and lead the band in and out of pieces. He spends most of the time conducting and letting them do their work. The result is a double album that sounds, on CD, like two or three long pieces of abstract electronic music, not a jazz-funk band jamming and grooving. Close listening reveals incredible imagination at work: the music is constantly shifting in subtle ways, like patterns of moss on a vast black rock.

Miles was often accused of coasting during the 1970s. He was called a sellout for admitting he wanted to sell records. The truth is, of course, much

more complex. Miles recognized that his new sound was alienating to old-line jazz listeners, and Columbia Records's then-new president, Clive Davis, thought it might reach adventurous rock fans instead. But both men had to recognize that the music the trumpeter was making was resolutely uncommercial. Edited singles were released from *Bitches Brew* and *On the Corner* but, those half-hearted attempts aside, Miles's chances in the rock marketplace depended on FM radio, then fairly wide-open territory. No mainstream station was going to play a twenty-eight-minute song with minimal melody and no vocals or hooks of any kind. The records from the early seventies were some of the most difficult and challenging of Miles's career. The problem was, they weren't jazz records in the way jazz critics had come to expect. There was improvisation, but traditional melodies and chord changes were largely absent. The band might spend a half hour working off one chord, and one rhythm, and melody was shrugged off with a repeating trumpet figure like the hypnotic coil of notes that anchors "Black Satin," an *On the Corner* cut that was remixed and released as a single under the title "The Molester." All of this created problems for the label's marketing department.

When he retired, Miles was at the top of his game. He was a sonic pioneer, unafraid to outstrip his audience and even his fellow musicians—bandmates and competitors alike. While he was away, his innovations were absorbed into the larger music scene, by former collaborators and others. John McLaughlin's group Mahavishnu Orchestra, Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter's Weather Report, Chick Corea's Return to Forever, and Herbie Hancock's Headhunters all sold lots of albums and concert tickets in the 1970s, and wound up pushing jazz toward where Miles had been heading before he vanished. What had been considered vulgar and aberrant became the mainstream. Players who didn't make the transition to "fusion" saw their bookings dry up and their sales diminish. Of course, the music made by Miles's ex-sidemen, not to mention the other fusioneers, was for the most part much more commercial than Davis's records. Weather Report played melodic tunes with little or no extended soloing, and Mahavishnu Orchestra were for all intents and purposes a progressive hard rock band.

This validation of Miles's vision didn't make him any happier about being pushed aside, commercially speaking, in favor of his sidemen, particularly when he felt the problems lay with his label, not with him. As he put it in his autobiography,

> *[W]hen Herbie Hancock put out his* Head Hunters *album and it sold like hotcakes in the young black community, everybody at Columbia said "Oh. So that's what Miles was talking about!" But that was too late for* On the Corner, *and watching the way* Head Hunters *sold just pissed me off even more.*

These changes in the jazz scene colored Davis's return. In a way, his position in 1981 was what it had been in the early 1950s, before signing with Columbia Records. Miles wasn't a leader anymore, even though he was probably the most famous living trumpeter in jazz. With little or none of the aggressiveness he'd made a sonic trademark present in the music of his former sidemen and other acolytes, it wasn't as easy to spot his influence as it had been in prior decades. To many critics and casual observers, Miles's defining quality had become his fame, not his talent. This was an understandable perception, the result of a half-decade's public inactivity, but it was nowhere near accurate.

The Miles Davis of the 1980s and early 1990s was, admittedly, almost the antithesis of the Miles Davis of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. He himself joked that he'd received a "personality-lift," and it might have seemed that way to people who'd known him, or thought they had, in the past. In *Miles*, Davis talked about his famous attitude, saying,

> *As much as I love Dizzy [Gillespie] and loved Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong, I always hated the way they used to laugh and grin for the audiences . . . I didn't look at myself as an entertainer like they both did . . . I wanted to be accepted as a good musician and that didn't call for no grinning, but just being able to play the horn good. And that's what I did then and now.*

But in the eighties, Miles gave interviews to practically anyone who asked. He told jokes. He clowned around onstage, at one point adopting the practice of holding up signs with bandmembers' names as they soloed. (This was doubtless helpful to some, since Miles's bands from 1981 on were largely composed of otherwise unknown players less than half his age.) And his wardrobe, which had changed from classic suits to modish designer outfits in the sixties, became even more of-the-moment, tending to feature baggy satin pants, loudly patterned jackets, huge sunglasses, wigs and hair extensions.

Miles began appearing in movies and on television. He performed on the shows *Night Music* and *Saturday Night Live*, and allowed a PBS documentary crew to follow his band on tour. He hosted an afternoon of music videos on VH-1. He guested on an episode of *Miami Vice*. He made a cameo as a street musician in the film *Scrooged*, and acted (playing the trumpeter "Billy Cross") in *Dingo*. Miles even made a music video, directed by Spike Lee, for the title track from his 1986 album *Tutu*. And then there was his career as a painter. It really could have seemed, to a casual observer, that Miles had become a superstar, a towering figure in American culture, and no longer a "mere" musician.

But the music was still the most important thing. So what was he playing in those years? The answer is multifaceted, as it always was with Miles,

especially during the electric years. When he returned with *The Man with the Horn*, and its live follow-up *We Want Miles*, he was still exploring funk, but it was a very different funk than that of the 1970s. He'd abandoned the congested Fourth World monster jams of *Agharta* and *Dark Magus* for a much more urban and electronic sound, spiritually kin to the black pop of the time. His new songs were staccato, built around Marcus Miller's thumb-popping basslines. On the first three comeback records—*The Man with the Horn*, *We Want Miles*, and *Star People*—there were almost no keyboards at all. The funk strutted from every corner of these albums; their often-infectious melodies were in the service of thick grooves played by a sextet with rock instrumentation (guitar, bass, drums, percussion, saxophone, plus Miles).

Later in the decade, keyboards returned to the band in a big way. This wasn't *always* to the music's detriment, but many critics felt they watered down the sound, turning the melodies saccharine and the ballads turgid. Miles, by contrast, believed the synthesizers allowed him to create the full, big-band sound that would have required banks of horns in earlier decades.

The new songs, with keyboards or without, were structured differently from the material of the 1970s, and everything before that as well. The 1970s bands had worked on a massive scale, with each member contributing to the maelstrom and only occasionally soloing their way out into the spotlight. The 1980s bands, however, played discrete compositions, taking breaks for applause between numbers, and solo space was much more limited. During a typical piece, Miles would do much of the lead playing, and another member of the band, a guitarist or a saxophonist, might receive a turn in the spotlight. The rest of the band maintained strict control over the melody of the song, taking it through various rhythmic permutations, but always hewing fairly close to the territory where it began.

This simplification allowed Miles to explore a side of his music that had become less prominent in the late 1960s and early 1970s: his ability to play the blues. Raised in St. Louis, he'd always had a powerful feeling for the blues, but none of his electric albums had really demonstrated it, with a few isolated exceptions like "Honky Tonk" from *Live-Evil* or "Red China Blues" from *Get Up With It*. When he returned, though, the blues came back with him. The first sign was a version of "My Man's Gone Now" taking up an entire album side of *We Want Miles*, but *Star People* was the real proof. "New Blues" was an obvious clue, but "Star on Cecily" and the album's title track were as deep as Miles had ever gotten. So while his new sound was glossy and street-oriented, in important ways it was also a look back at, and incorporation of, jazz's earliest roots. Miles was demonstrating that it was possible to continually move forward without forgetting the past.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, his trumpet playing changed again, too. He'd put the wah-wah pedal down, understanding that it wouldn't suit the

new, more stripped-down music he was playing. He did begin to rely on the Harmon mute more than he had in decades, though. At the same time, he made upper-register work a much larger part of his soloing and even his melodies. Miles told an interviewer that he began playing more high notes because he could "hear" those notes—that is, they sounded good to him, and attracted him as a player—where he hadn't been able to before.

A wireless microphone allowed him to walk all over the stage during concerts, interacting with bandmembers or simply looking down at his shoes as he played. On albums and in concert, the band played rhythms previously unknown to jazz, like go-go, the regional funk emanating from Washington D.C. All this took place in front of some of the largest and most fervent audiences he'd ever faced. Miles was a major concert draw in the 1980s, touring regularly all over the world, and turning up at the Montreux Jazz Festival nearly every year.

Much of his appeal was likely due to the simple fact of his return. Many jazz fans seemed to write him off after his 1975 disappearance. When he re-emerged and resumed an extraordinarily active recording and playing schedule, there was undoubtedly a great deal of simple gratitude at still having Miles Davis around. After all, no major jazz movements had emerged in his absence. So even if his studio albums didn't get the critical respect of old, the magnetic draw of Miles Davis the icon ensured a steady stream of high-profile gigs. His technique took a year or so to return, but by the mid-1980s it was as strong as it had ever been. That only cemented his status. The throne of jazz's biggest superstar was his for as long as he chose to sit upon it.

Even writers critical of Miles's 1980s output will often agree that two of his most fascinating records were made during the decade: 1984's *Aura* (not released until 1989) and 1986's *Tutu*, the album that inaugurated his contract with Warner Bros. In collaborations with Danish composer Palle Mikkelborg and Marcus Miller, respectively, Davis used the studio to explore more adventurously than he'd done since *On the Corner*. On *Tutu*, he performed virtually solo, with the majority of the record laid to tape beforehand by Miller. The electronic nature of *Tutu*'s pulsing grooves was shocking, and slightly discomfiting to some—as had been virtually every phase of Miles's career to that point. It remains, along with *Kind Of Blue*, one of the Miles records most likely to sit alone in otherwise Davis-free record collections, though. *Aura*, by contrast, was an orchestral work built around Davis's trumpet, and showcased some of the best straight trumpet playing of his life. He described it as a masterpiece in his autobiography, and more than a few reviewers concurred.

It's been over a decade since Miles Davis died, and the music he left behind continues to demand reassessment, both critical and public. Each

phase of his career gets its moment in the pop-culture sun, as albums are reissued—often, lately, in expanded form. *In a Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew*, and *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* have all become multi-disc boxed sets, and even more radically, *Cookin' at the Plugged Nickel* is now the eight-CD box *The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965*. In the fall of 2005, the live recordings spliced into *Live-Evil* became part of the six-CD *Complete Live at the Cellar Door* box.

In the mid-1990s, the seventies albums got their turn. *Dark Magus* was issued in the U.S. for the first time, and all the other double albums originally released between 1970 and 1975 became available on remastered CDs, ready to be marketed to a new audience of hipster rock fans. Some of these new listeners hadn't even been born when the music was recorded.

Only the 1980s material, at this point, hasn't been given the deluxe reissue treatment. *The Last Word*, a four-CD box collecting the Warner Bros. albums *Tutu*, *Amandla*, and *Doo-Bop*, along with contemporaneous live tracks and portions of three movie soundtracks—*Dingo*, *Siesta*, and *The Hot Spot*—was planned, but scrapped. Most of the Columbia albums from the 1980s are still in print in the U.S. (with the somewhat mysterious exception of *Star People*), but only *Aura* has been digitally remastered like the work from prior decades

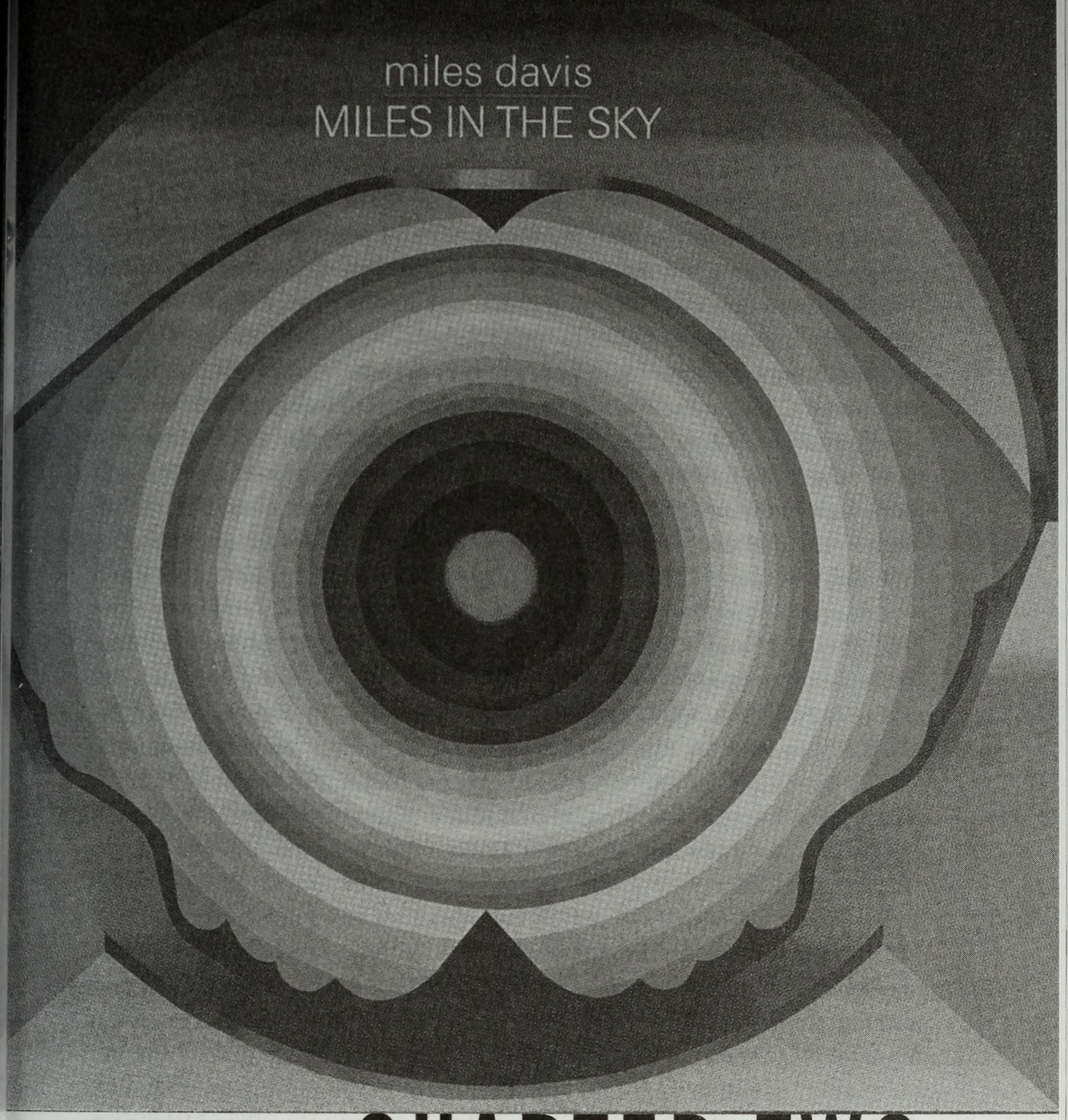
And yet, there's definite value to the final albums. Even the ones considered least rewarding—*The Man with the Horn*, *Decoy*, and yes, even the posthumous hip-hop record *Doo-Bop*—contain moments of raw power and stark beauty. And as the 2002 boxed set *The Complete Miles Davis at Montreux 1973–1991* reveals (eighteen of its twenty CDs were recorded between 1984 and 1991), this allegedly unpromising material came to screaming life onstage. Songs Miles was reviled for recording, like the pop hits "Human Nature" and "Time After Time," were not only hugely popular in concert, but became vehicles for some of his most lyrical and heartfelt playing, as the 1940s standards and show tunes he'd played during the first half of his career had been.

Every Miles Davis album contains music of great value and astonishing beauty. Many of those recorded between 1968 and 1991—*Miles in the Sky* through *Doo-Bop*, and everything in between—are among his best. Whether a listener finds, say, *Bitches Brew* or *On the Corner* aesthetically pleasing isn't even the point, really; the innovation displayed in the former's oceans of electric piano, or the latter's hostile, uncompromising grooves, is undeniable.

Miles Davis permanently altered jazz in his own image—and at the same time he created a unique, personal archetype of African-American cool. This combination kept him mutable and relevant for nearly four decades. One of the major jazz guides posits the possibility of analyzing jazz

from the 1940s to the 1990s exclusively from the perspective of Miles's role in it. When only the 1960s and after are considered, such an angle makes even more sense.

It's hard to imagine what jazz would be like today without Miles's electric innovations. The array of musicians he hired early in their careers was awe-inspiring, not only for what they played under his umbrella but because of the success so many of them found as leaders once they left his employ. The production techniques he and Teo Macero pioneered were adopted later in jazz, rock, and even rap and dance music. Truly, Miles Davis's electric music has been one of the most important catalytic forces in twentieth century music, regardless of genre.



CHAPTER TWO
IT'S ABOUT THAT TIME
(1968–1970)

IT'S MAY 17, 1968. Herbie Hancock walks into Columbia's Studio B for a Miles Davis Quintet session. But there's no piano, just a Fender Rhodes electric. This is where it all begins—the recording of "Stuff," for the album *Miles in the Sky*.

Okay, not quite. Joe Beck holds the honor of being the first person to actually play an electric instrument on a Davis session—that's his guitar droning on "Circle in the Round," laid to tape in December 1967. And Hancock played electric piano on "Fun," recorded in January of 1968. But those were experiments, one-offs, and neither was released at the time; they were held until it became necessary to scour the vaults, during Miles's missing years. "Circle in the Round" was the title track of the 1976 album of the same name, and "Fun" showed up on 1981's *Directions*.

"Stuff" is a different animal—an album cut, and one that marks a genuine shift in Miles's music. That might be why he opened *Miles in the Sky* with it, instead of tucking it away somewhere. "Stuff" is the sound of a door opening into a long, mysterious hallway, lined by all the other doors Davis would open in the two and a half decades to follow.

In another way, "Stuff" is the starter's pistol firing to begin a two-year sprint. Between May 17, 1968 and December 19, 1970, Miles would record five albums of studio material (*Miles in the Sky*, *Filles de Kilimanjaro*, *In a Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew*, and *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*), four official live albums (*Live at the Fillmore East (March 7, 1970): It's About That Time*, *Black Beauty*, *At Fillmore*, and *Live-Evil*), and a slew of tracks that would remain unreleased for decades, eventually filling out the "Complete Sessions" series of boxed sets centering on *In a Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew*, and *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*. It was a flood of material, all the more astonishing because of the metamorphoses that took place every time Davis called a session. The music on *Live-Evil* is of a completely different order than that on *Filles de Kilimanjaro*, and the same is true of every step along Miles's journey out of acoustic jazz and into . . . whatever he wound up creating should be called.

"Stuff" opens as decidedly funky soul-jazz. Ron Carter's bass is electric; Herbie's all over the Fender Rhodes. Behind them both is Tony Williams, keeping rock-solid time even when he's throwing in militaristic snare-drum barrages or slashing at the cymbals. The first few seconds of the tune don't scream "Miles Davis." They could have come from a contemporaneous Blue Note album by Horace Silver or Lee Morgan.

The electric piano is always more obtrusive than the acoustic, so even though Hancock may not be comping any more extravagantly than usual, he draws more attention to himself. As Miles put it in his autobiography, "the Fender Rhodes has one sound and that sound is itself. It has no other sound. You always know what it is."

Ron Carter's bass playing is louder too. He's bagged his usual elegant swing, replacing it with a funky strut.

When the horns come in, though, there's no mistaking who's playing them. Davis and Wayne Shorter dance through a long, complex, stuttering melody line, one that's perfectly in line with Williams's rhythms, but

around which Carter and Hancock's contributions seem almost excessively complex.

Miles's solo brings everything together. Hancock and Carter draw back, and he plays open horn for five minutes, soaring over the churning rhythm. Shorter's up next, blowing the blues but occasionally hinting at the possibility of something more. It's a good solo, and it works well within the context of the piece, but it demonstrates why he's mostly revered as a composer. His reluctance to explode frequently imprisons him in a cage of good taste. Even on freer outings, like his 1969 Blue Note album *Super Nova*, it's up to Shorter's sidemen (guitarists Sonny Sharrock and John McLaughlin, among others) to head skyward in triumph. His tendency to hang back, and play the pretty notes, is particularly noticeable on "Stuff," where Davis is clearly leaving room for his band to get raunchy.

Hancock's "Stuff" solo is fascinating. He really takes to the Fender Rhodes, exploring its ability to manipulate sound through sustain and echo. Miles and his band quickly realized that electric instruments were different—not superior or inferior, but qualitatively different—from acoustic ones, even if critics didn't. Thus, Hancock's contribution (and, to a slightly lesser degree, Carter's) is what really lifts "Stuff" away from all that's come before it. Williams's soul/funk rhythms would have worked just as well behind an all-acoustic band. The proof of that is the rest of the record, on which Hancock plays traditional piano.

Miles in the Sky was the last complete album to feature the quintet Miles had fronted since 1965. The next record he released, *Filles de Kilimanjaro*, went even further out than its predecessor. Three of its five tracks were recorded, with the quintet, in June 1968. The other two were laid to tape three months later, with a band that was radically different in personnel and sound.

Carter had been missing live gigs for months. He'd become a popular session player, and Davis claimed he never grew to love playing the electric bass. So in August 1968, Miles recruited a white Englishman, Dave Holland, on a trip to London. Keyboardist Chick Corea was brought on board around the same time, after Herbie Hancock got sick on his honeymoon.

It's funny, in light of Miles's statements about Carter, to note that Holland doesn't play electric bass on *Filles de Kilimanjaro*. He didn't plug in until sometime in 1969, after he'd been in the band nearly a year. That didn't stop him from bringing the funk in the studio, though. Holland's lines are often thicker and more fixated on groove than Carter's had been. Tony Williams responded to the new direction (what parts of it he wasn't actually leading, from behind the kit) with enthusiasm. He still hit everything within reach, but he made the time much more propulsive, not as spacious or sparse as it had been.

The change is audible from the first notes of "Frelon Brun." Williams announces the tune with a quick drum-roll, and Corea responds with a low fart from the Fender Rhodes, sounding almost like a bass clarinet. Davis and Holland come in seconds later. Miles's opening solo is a series of hummingbird trills and high-speed runs, with Corea comping behind him. Holland, otherwise the player quietest in the mix, announces himself in a major way. He's all over the neck, plucking and strumming in an almost Jimmy Garrison style, never losing the groove but never seeming to actually play it, either. Wayne Shorter's acerbic and cerebral solo actually throws something interesting into Miles's brand new bag, too.

How far Miles had gone, and how far he was planning to go, can be heard just by letting *Filles de Kilimanjaro* play out. The second track, "Tout De Suite," recorded with the older band, is close kin to the atmospheric pieces, many written by Shorter, that filled *Nefertiti*, the band's last all-acoustic album. The drums barely imply forward motion, and the keyboards and bass mostly vamp in place too. Davis and Shorter play unison melody lines. Even when Miles moves almost imperceptibly into a solo, Wayne shadows him. And it's not until two and a half minutes into the track, after that opening fanfare/solo, that Williams begins to assert himself. Even then, Hancock and Carter continue launching one or two notes at a time into the ether. No chord changes emerge; there's very little to hang onto as Miles begins a second solo. He seems to be dancing in midair, with the drums skittering all over the place underneath. Shorter follows his lead. For fourteen minutes, "Tout de Suite" skips amiably about, totally different from the hard, focused rhythm of "Frelon Brun."

The two pieces that follow, "Petits Machins" and "Filles de Kilimanjaro," also played by the old quintet, are in a similar vein. The title track's more melodically assertive than "Tout de Suite" or "Petits Machins," but both have the amorphous, free-ish quality Miles seemed to be exploring at the time.

The album's closing track, "Mademoiselle Mabry," is named for Betty Mabry. (Miles married her less than a week after it was recorded.) It was obviously intended as a showcase for the new band. Even today, it sounds newer than the songs recorded only three months earlier.

"Mademoiselle Mabry" is a medium-tempo ballad, funky and soulful. Corea's keyboard anchors the action. Holland throbs beneath, playing variations on the intro, over and over. Williams limits himself to toms and cymbals, creating an ominous tension Miles cuts through with his first solo, three minutes into the sixteen-minute piece. He plays for almost six minutes before Shorter enters, blowing better than he does anywhere else on the disc. Williams changes his style behind the saxophonist, crashing the snare and the cymbals like waves hitting a jetty. When Corea begins a spacey solo, the drums change again, falling almost completely away, then

coming back in a hailstorm of cymbals and snare. Finally, Miles returns to finish the piece, and the album, with a simple, delicate outro.

Filles de Kilimanjaro isn't just a great album. It's also an indication of just how fast Miles was moving as the sixties drew to a close. The melodic and rhythmic innovations contained in its thick grooves and crystalline soundscapes could have provided lesser players with fertile improvisational territory for years to come. But Miles was not only onto something entirely new less than a year later, with *In a Silent Way*, he was doing a third, totally different thing live. Miles was moving in three directions at once throughout 1969.

He wasn't bringing the funk yet, in live performance. When Tony Williams left to form his Lifetime trio in early 1969, Davis replaced him with saxophonist Charles Lloyd's drummer, Jack DeJohnette. Onstage, this new quintet—Shorter, Corea, Holland, and DeJohnette—blurred the line between post-bop and total freedom. (By year's end, Davis would steal pianist Keith Jarrett from Lloyd too, giving himself two electric keyboardists to play over.)

Double Image, a concert recording from October 27, 1969, contains only two long pieces: one nearly thirty-five minutes, the other almost forty-five. The tracks are medleys of longtime live staples like "Milestones" and "Directions." The band's book would expand slightly during its lifetime, but they'd continue to play these tunes until as late as 1971.

The show's interesting, because the transitions are seamless. Holland is practically inaudible, which is too bad. On some other, better-quality recordings, he comes close at times to dominating the ensemble. Jack DeJohnette's drumming mixes swing with free-rock beats, and when he can be heard, Holland's right there with him, filling in every available space behind the front line. He still hadn't made the transition to electric bass; that wouldn't come until 1970, on albums like *Black Beauty* and *At Fillmore*, and plugging in would change his sound dramatically.

Corea's playing is restrained compared with earlier dates like the one at Juan-les-Pins. He never really screws around with the electric piano's sonic possibilities. Shorter is the player who goes the furthest out—without making it all the way to skronk, of course. The relatively straight-ahead feel of the set suits his temperament. He's able to play in the fleet, lyrical style he's most comfortable with, and doesn't have to work his way through a hurricane of cacophony, as he would by early 1970.

Most of the rip-roaring, quiveringly alive feel of these performances was subverted in the recording studio. Miles never brought his live quintet in to record, preferring to throw one or two of them at a time into a mix of longtime associates and new faces. But on February 18, 1969, he laid down one of the two albums that would break him wide open, commercially

speaking. The band was Wayne Shorter on soprano sax, Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock on electric pianos, Joe Zawinul on organ, John McLaughlin on guitar, Dave Holland on bass, and Tony Williams on drums, and the record was *In a Silent Way*.

Zawinul was the wild card. Formerly of Cannonball Adderley's band, he was also the composer of the album's title track. His version was very different from what Miles told the band to play, though. Zawinul had interesting ideas about instrumentation, but as a composer he was pretty traditional. In his mind, "In a Silent Way" had an introduction, and chord changes. Miles pared all that away, turning the piece into a one-chord vamp. He had John McLaughlin play the melody only as a way of introducing his guitar solo. And yet, by stripping the tune down to virtually nothing, to a skeleton of itself, its beauty emerged in sharp relief. In his autobiography, Miles put it like this:

> *I wanted to make the sound more like rock. In rehearsals we had played it like Joe had written it, but it wasn't working for me because all the chords were cluttering it up. I could hear that the melody that Joe had written—which was hidden by all the clutter—was really beautiful. When we recorded I just threw out the chord sheets and told everyone to play just the melody, just to play off that . . . Joe never did like what I did with his composition, and I don't think he likes it even today. But it worked and that's all that really matters. Today many people consider Joe's tune a classic and the beginning of fusion. If I had left that tune the way Joe had it, I don't think it would have been praised the way it was after the album came out . . . People were walking around mad because I took credit for arranging "In a Silent Way," but I* did *arrange the music by changing it like I did.*

In a Silent Way's minimalism is precisely what makes it such a fascinating record. It's barely there. Even when players are soloing, they sound like they're feeling their way around, blindfolded, in the dark. Everything sounds like it's being played by men on tiptoe. The aggression and visceral force of the live band are totally absent. In the studio, restraint is everything. All is not calm, though. There's a lot going on beneath the surface of this music, especially in the interplay among the three keyboardists.

The album's first half, "Shhh/Peaceful," simmers without ever boiling over. Its introduction reappears, via tape splicing, at the end, to serve as a coda and create structure where there hadn't been any at the end of the recording session. One reviewer felt it necessary to point this out to his readers as a mistake; he believed it was an error on the record company's part that would surely be corrected on later editions of the album. In fact, that was Teo Macero's doing—a successful attempt to create a full-length record out of about a half hour's worth of usable music.

Macero was occasionally crude. His big idea of bringing pop-style tape editing and studio manipulation into jazz was clearly present, but it was in embryonic form. A year or two later, Macero would be an absolute master of the control board and the razor blade, his efforts yielding pieces like "Go Ahead John" (recorded in 1970, released in 1974). But he wasn't there yet. The most glaring example of his still-rudimentary technique isn't the repetition of the intro; it's an incredibly clumsy tape-slice at the halfway point of the piece. It's off-beat, and deliberately so. The intended effect seems to be to juggle the listener just a little bit off balance, as though the drummer had suddenly switched rhythms. And it does that, but not in a way that pleases the ear. It's quite jarring, particularly on headphones.

Still, "Shhh/Peaceful" is a beautiful piece overall. Miles solos subtly, but lyrically; what he plays to begin the piece is worth repeating at the end. John McLaughlin's guitar contributions are minimal; he vamps on one chord for the length of the track. Tony Williams rides the hi-hat from beginning to end. It's his metronomic rhythm that gives the piece its mood. If Williams had cut loose, even a little, "Shhh/Peaceful" would have been an entirely different kind of music. The electric pianos and organ, rippling the air and dancing with one another, would have seemed like they were actually going somewhere, instead of hovering, cloudlike. Dave Holland's basslines would have felt more active. But because (one must assume) Miles had told Williams not to let the groove explode, the track never breaks free, either. It shimmers in place, like a distant, flickering light seen through moonlit fog.

Side Two of the album, "In a Silent Way/It's About That Time," is *slightly* more energetic than its predecessor. It should actually be titled "In a Silent Way/It's About That Time/In a Silent Way," because that's the structure. The first section, just over four minutes long, is almost totally free. It's like a fanfare played at ballad tempo. But "It's About That Time" lives up to its title, because when its muscular, hypnotic bass riff takes over, flanked by the electric pianos, any listener would be forgiven for thinking "Well, it's about damn time." McLaughlin plays wiry blues lines on the cut, casting notes out into the dark like a fly-fisherman.

Tony Williams maintains the same relentless hi-hat he did throughout the album's first half. But then, out of nowhere, thirteen minutes in, something *happens*. Catharsis arrives at last. It's not some huge thing. It's not some twenty-kiloton Buddy Rich explosion. But in light of all that's come before, the thirty-plus minutes of slowly deepening trance, one riff repeating over and over until that's all the ear/brain even registers anymore, the solos vanishing into the background as the melody dominates—when Williams actually *plays the drums* for forty-five seconds, it's like James Brown kicking his whole band into high gear. Despite all the album's other virtues, it's that moment that makes *In a Silent Way* worth hearing.

Because, in all honesty, it's more of an experiment than an album. *Miles in the Sky* and *Filles de Kilimanjaro* are more solid, more accomplished records. They're focused, incisive statements. *In a Silent Way*, though it has moments of brilliance, is a diffuse *attempt* at a new thing. It's studded with signposts indicating directions Miles would take in the years to come.

The rhythm is propulsive in a less-swinging way than before. There's electric guitar—not the shy, self-effacing chords of jazz guitar, but real electric guitar that makes its presence known, that seizes territory and won't give it back. Miles and Wayne Shorter solo endlessly over oceans of electric piano, bass, and drums. This is predawn music. If you try to sit down and follow the solos, the way jazz heads have been doing since bebop, you'll go insane just listening to that endless, repetitive hi-hat. It's a soundtrack for sex, not dancing.

Rock critics thought *In a Silent Way* sounded like rock, or at least thought Miles was nodding in their direction, and practically wet themselves with joy. Jazz critics, especially ones who didn't listen to much rock, thought it sounded like rock too, and they reacted less favorably. It was still Miles, though, and Miles was still the man, so the decision on both sides of the scribbling community was that they'd ride with him for a little while, see where he was going.

Both reactions were rooted, at least partly, in the critic's paranoia about his place in the world (the music world and the "real" world). Rock criticism was a fairly new profession, which meant that there were no real rules, but it also meant there was no real audience, other than fellow rock critics and a few other overeducated geeks on this or that college campus. So for someone as definitively Hip as Miles Davis to make a record that seemingly acknowledged the existence not only of rock, but *psychedelic* rock (viewed back then as the intellectual *ne plus ultra* of the music) functioned as a sort of cosmic pat on the head. It was reassurance that they really *were* on to something, that the world *was* changing, and in their favor. (Untrue, but hard to disprove back in those days, apparently.)

For jazz critics, on the other hand, *In a Silent Way* was a nightmare. It didn't swing, the solos weren't even a little bit heroic, and it had *electric guitars*. It was betrayal. Jazz fans were an embattled minority by the late 1960s. Rock's takeover of popular culture was nearly complete. For a totemic figure like Miles to turn his back on those who'd been faithful to him was agony.

But though *In a Silent Way* wasn't exactly jazz, it certainly wasn't rock. It was the sound of Miles Davis and Teo Macero feeling their way down an unlit hall at three in the morning. It was the soundtrack to all the whispered conversations every creative artist has, all the time, with that doubting, taunting voice that lives in the back of your head, the one asking all the unanswerable questions.

In a Silent Way got noticed, commercially speaking. It sold better than typical for Miles. But its success was nothing compared to that of its follow-up. By the time *In a Silent Way* was released, in September 1969, Miles had already recorded *Bitches Brew*, and after that dropped, nothing would ever be the same for him—or for jazz.

Bitches Brew was recorded in the third week of August 1969, immediately after the Woodstock Festival. There were no hippie peace-and-love vibes present in the studio. Miles and Teo were at each other's throats as the sessions began, the producer screaming and Miles hissing profanities in response. Macero has recalled telling Davis to take his trumpet and get the fuck out of the studio, in fact. Instead, Miles left the control room, joined the band, and recorded some of the most technically and emotionally powerful solos of his career.

The sessions were different from the recording of *In a Silent Way* in a number of ways. The music was much more aggressive and propulsive. The ensemble was bigger too. Zawinul and Corea were back, as were Shorter, McLaughlin, Holland, and DeJohnette, but they were joined by Bennie Maupin on bass clarinet, Larry Young on keyboards, percussionists Don Alias and Jumma Santos, bassist Harvey Brooks, and drummer Lenny White. Obviously, the double rhythm section added a great deal of bottom and momentum to the music. Holland was playing acoustic bass, dancing around Brooks's electric lines. Chick Corea played keyboards throughout the album, as did Zawinul—Larry Young appeared on only two tracks out of six, "Spanish Key" and "Pharaoh's Dance." McLaughlin's guitar rose to the surface of the music more often than it had on the previous album, to the point that an outtake from the title track was named after him and given pride of place on Side Three of the vinyl.

Unlike *In a Silent Way*, fully half the material on *Bitches Brew* had already appeared in live sets prior to the recording. The 1969 quintet had been playing "Spanish Key," "Miles Runs the Voodoo Down" and "Sanctuary" in concert for months before the sessions, which is why their structure is much more organic than "Pharaoh's Dance" and the title track. Those two compositions, which make up the album's first disc, are edited much more heavily than the others. "Pharaoh's Dance" contains eighteen separate edits, everything from pasting solos into place to repeating a one-second nugget of music five times in a row, right around the nine-minute mark.

The recording of "Bitches Brew" and "Pharaoh's Dance" made the extensive post-production work necessary. Neither piece was played through, from beginning to end, at any point during the three days of sessions. Instead, the rhythm section would set up a groove, the band would play for a little while, one of the musicians would solo, and everybody

would stop. They'd start up again, another solo would get laid down, and they'd stop again. Bandmembers could hear, and feel, Miles's ideas developing as the process went on—concepts emerging on the fly.

These heavily edited tracks are aberrations, but they're the ones most strongly identified, in most listeners' minds, with this stage in Miles's evolution. The organic performances tend to drift into the background, because they're not as sonically radical as those on the first disc. This is particularly true of "Sanctuary," the closest thing to a studio recording by the Shorter/Corea/Holland/DeJohnette quintet. (One take exists with only the quintet, plus Alias' percussion; this was paired with another performance, which featured Zawinul and Santos as well, to create the final album master.) Also, the tracks on which Macero did the most work are the most coherent. He imposed a flow and a structure that's absent in other places, "John McLaughlin" in particular. The brief, repetitive organ riff that anchors that track isn't enough to turn it into a song. It still sounds like what it is: an excuse for a guitar solo.

"Pharaoh's Dance" is much more than that. From the first notes, it's evident that something entirely new is going on. The same hi-hat that ran through all of *In a Silent Way* is the first sound you hear, only it's Jack DeJohnette, not Tony Williams, playing it this time. The rhythm's a little more forceful, and it's being accented on the other side by Lenny White's feather-soft whooshes on the cymbals. Dave Holland is the only bassist at the start, and Bennie Maupin is murmuring low on the bass clarinet. After just over ninety seconds, the first obvious edit occurs, and the whole thing seems to start over again.

At the two and a half minute mark, Miles comes in. He plays a few brief phrases and then vanishes, leaving McLaughlin, Maupin, and particularly Corea to fill the space. Then, thirty seconds or so later, he's back. He's blowing one or two notes at a time, sharp blasts, dancing on top of the propulsive rhythm and swirling keyboards. Miles is mixed louder than anybody else in the ensemble. When he's playing, the band recedes into the background slightly, the same way vocalists are given pride of place in radio-friendly pop mixes. That, combined with the rhythms being played by DeJohnette and White, took the music toward "fusion"—a label that was already being tossed around.

"Pharaoh's Dance" runs just over twenty minutes, but it's so tightly constructed that it never has the aura of a jam, the way more traditional jazz pieces of equal length do. By the time it fades out, it feels more like prog-rock. "Bitches Brew," which is much longer (nearly twenty-seven minutes), has a similar effect. It begins with low, ominous chords from the electric piano, almost like a track by Procol Harum or Iron Butterfly. The piece has some of the same semi-ambient feel of "Shhh/Peaceful," but with much more soloing.

"Miles Runs the Voodoo Down," though it's among the least edited tracks on *Bitches Brew*, is one of the album's definite peaks. It's propelled by a thrumming bassline that sounds similar to what Michael Henderson would bring to the band on later albums. Indeed, with its interplay between McLaughlin's guitar and Corea's often very noisy electric piano, and Miles's fluid trumpet solos, the track sets precedent for later lengthy, organic-feeling pieces like "Go Ahead John," from *Big Fun*, and "Helen Butte/Mr. Freedom X," from *On the Corner*.

It's also important to talk about *Bitches Brew*'s artwork. The cover was as shocking, and uncompromising, as the sounds within. It was the third, and final, album to bear the slogan "Directions in Music by Miles Davis"—six emphatic words that indicated Miles's dissatisfaction with jazz, both as a label and a concept. Miles claimed he did it

> *so that nobody could be mistaken about* who *was the creative control behind the music . . . I wanted to control whatever music I put on record. I was moving more and more to using electronic instruments to make up the sound that I wanted, and I felt that saying "Directions in Music by Miles Davis" would indicate that.*

As with much in Miles's autobiography, though, that doesn't seem like a fully accurate description of the situation. It's been stated in numerous places that the assembly of *In a Silent Way* and the first half of *Bitches Brew* ("Pharaoh's Dance" and the title track) was left almost entirely up to Macero. Later albums, *On the Corner* in particular, were dominated by Miles's concepts much more than the two that bear his emphatic declaration of command. With this in mind, it seems more accurate to understand the slogan as a pre-emptive strike, an attempt by Miles to seize credit publicly for records that others—Macero, some of his freely-improvising sidemen—might think were the results of *their* creativity as much as the trumpeter's.

The cover painting is important too. The psychedelic dreamscapes that stretched across both double-album foldouts were practically unprecedented in jazz, and still rare in rock. They said a lot about the music inside—the way it blended from one thing to another, the way the sections (a better descriptor than "songs") seem to come out of nowhere and go back there after fifteen or twenty minutes, the way the band combined darkness and light, heat and cool, "jazz" and "rock."

Bitches Brew was hugely successful for a jazz album. Released in April 1970, it sold 70,000 copies in its first month on the streets. This was a triumph of marketing—there's no way music this unremittingly abstract could have succeeded without the cover art it sported or the efforts of Columbia's publicity department. And honestly, *Bitches Brew* is not one of Miles's best

albums. It has moments of greatness, but there are at most three killer tracks out of six ("Pharaoh's Dance," "Bitches Brew," and "Miles Runs the Voodoo Down"). The others are often aimless, seeming to start out of nowhere and end arbitrarily, with some interesting solos in between. That kind of approach can work in a live context, but a studio album demands discipline. The first disc of *Bitches Brew* has it; too much of the second doesn't.

At this point Miles began courting a rock audience in earnest. He played two Fillmore East gigs in March 1970, opening for Steve Miller and Neil Young. One month later, he played the Fillmore West in San Francisco—a gig that was recorded for the double album *Black Beauty. Live at the Fillmore East (March 7, 1970): It's About That Time*, documenting the earlier shows, wasn't released until August 2001.

At the Fillmore East, the live band was the same as it had been for some time, with the addition of Brazilian percussionist Airto Moreira. It was Wayne Shorter's last show with the group, though. (His final collaboration with Davis was a studio session on March 17, which yielded "Duran," released on 1981's *Directions*.) Miles replaced him with Steve Grossman for the April shows.

Unlike his predecessor, Grossman was never recorded on tenor saxophone with Miles. Davis and Macero used only his soprano solos when assembling records. While the sound of the soprano sax can often be keening and hard to take at length, within the electronic storm it worked perfectly.

The second major change in Miles's group sound was Dave Holland's move to the electric bass. While he still picked up the acoustic from time to time, he began to spend most of his onstage time playing a Fender electric, through his own stack of amps. Naturally, this forced him to change his style. The electric bass just isn't as subtle an instrument as the acoustic. Holland's deft, flitting acoustic lines gave way to funky swaggering, imbued with generous doses of the blues.

Airto Moreira's entrance as full-time percussionist also changed the group dynamic. He played just about anything he could get his hands on, from congas and shakers to small frying pans and jawbones. Much of what he contributed was barely audible, particularly live, but when he could be heard, a subtle shimmer was created around the edges of the din.

"Din" is actually the perfect word to describe much of *Black Beauty*, and that's not a putdown. The album features versions of "Miles Runs the Voodoo Down," "Sanctuary," "Bitches Brew," and "Spanish Key" alongside pieces that had been in the live repertoire for years, like "Directions" and a ninety-second snippet of "I Fall in Love Too Easily." Also featured is the then-unreleased track "Willie Nelson," the bassline of which is funky and

hypnotic in exactly the way Michael Henderson's work would be when he replaced Holland in late summer.

"Directions," which opens the album, is nearly unrecognizable. Chick Corea is entirely consumed by the possibilities of his instrument. He takes almost no interest in making the thing sound like a piano, or any type of keyboard. He's churning out a rumbling riff that sounds like a submarine spinning its propellers in soupy mud, as Jack DeJohnette hammers the beat home and Dave Holland pumps out a hard-rocking bassline. Only when Miles reveals the main hook on trumpet, a few minutes in, is it even apparent what piece is being played. From the first "note," the band is into the realm of pure sound, and it's fantastic.

The sequence of "Directions," "Miles Runs the Voodoo Down," and "Willie Nelson," each one powered by thunderous bass-and-drum work from Holland and DeJohnette, and supported by Corea's searing electric piano, is a 1-2-3 pummel that virtually demands some kind of respite, however brief. Thus, "I Fall in Love Too Easily"—the kind of florid, yet restrained ballad Miles had been playing for twenty-five years, and which he had utterly mastered. An equally mellow "Sanctuary" follows, and Disc One closes with a ten-minute rendition of "It's About That Time," the most propulsive section of *In a Silent Way*.

Black Beauty's second disc opens with a thirteen-minute take on "Bitches Brew" that's completely different from the carefully constructed studio version. Half as long, it's much rawer and noisier. Corea's electric piano exchanges the liquid tones of the studio take for the sound of frying circuitry. Grossman goes wild in response, turning much of the piece into a duet between his squawking saxophone and Corea's gnarled keyboards. Miles solos but mostly limits himself to stating the hook (the only thing this take and the earlier one have in common), then hovering around the edges. Holland and DeJohnette stay out of the way too, content to keep the rhythm rock-solid.

This manipulation of material between studio and stage demonstrated Miles's seemingly endless creative fertility and the brilliance of the players with which he surrounded himself. Because of its unstructured nature, this was more of a collective music than anything he'd done before. It was what he'd always done, whether it was with his acoustic quintet ripping up standards or the new electronic band's wildass adventures. It could also be read as shrugging off the "sellout" accusations lobbed by rock-ignorant critics. Nothing Miles played at the Fillmore could have been construed as selling out, or any kind of concession at all. It's almost impossible to imagine what Miles might have thought the assembled rock fans, however adventurous their tastes, would have made of what his sextet was playing. It's easier, and more logical, to imagine that he didn't think about it at all.

Black Beauty also signaled a new militancy in Miles's imagery. It should be obvious that the title has nothing to do with horses. Miles meant Black Beauty as in Black Art. He was never the most retiring guy where race was concerned. His willingness to employ white musicians was matched by his unwillingness to take shit from white people, and starting in 1968 he signaled his blackness, over and over again, with less and less subtlety. The photo on the back of *Miles in the Sky* is a perfect example. Miles looks directly into the camera, sitting with legs wide open, and a lion's head between them. It's a pose worthy of Nigerian bandleader Fela Anikulapo Kuti—in fact, Miles looks like Fela in the photo. Had he been wearing a loincloth in place of his stylish threads, the resemblance would have been complete.

In a Silent Way's artwork, like its music, was tame by comparison; a simple headshot of Miles gazing into the middle distance, not meeting the viewer's eyes. *Bitches Brew*'s wild gatefold paintings showcased a style that can only be described as "cosmic Afro-psychedelia"—a complement to its often dreamlike and disturbing music.

Black Beauty, *At Fillmore*, and *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* returned to the aggressive machismo of the *Miles in the Sky* back cover portrait. The front cover of *Black Beauty* is a blurred photo of Miles playing, tinted red, yellow, blue, and green as though by stage lights. Inside, there's an equally blurred photo of the whole band performing. Davis is wearing a sleeveless shirt and tight pants, legs akimbo, horn pointed at the floor. The rest of the band looks like a hippie-biker gang. Dave Holland, in particular, wouldn't look out of place onstage with any of the acts they opened for at the Fillmores East and West.

A Tribute to Jack Johnson, of course, features the famous photo of Miles in sleeveless shirt and leather pants, leaning back and blowing. His eyes are closed, his expression one of total concentration, but there's none of the stylish ease of the hard bop era. In 1970, and especially on an album named for a boxer, Miles wanted to show the world that he approached music as a competitive sport. He was ready to kick ass.

The cover of *At Fillmore*, recorded in June 1970, is a collage. Shots of the band playing, of Miles, and of one of his girlfriends, Jackie Battle, are all arranged in a checkerboard pattern. But inside, on what was the original vinyl album's gatefold, is another Fela-esque portrait, this one of Miles lying across a rug and staring defiantly at the camera. It's the kind of picture that risks self-parody, but he pulls it off.

In the spring of 1970, Miles kept busy in the studio, with eleven sessions booked between February 18 and June 4. A large chunk of this material was released on *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, and more emerged on *Live-Evil*, *Get Up With It*, *Directions*, and *Big Fun*. Still more lay in the vaults until the 2003 release of the five-CD *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions*, the third in Sony's series of "Complete Sessions" boxes from the electric era.

Hearing the 1970 studio material gathered in one spot reveals exactly what Miles was up to during that year. The explicit funk moves of 1972 and beyond were not even really hinted at yet, and the abstract electronic jamming of live performances, as documented on *Black Beauty* and *At Fillmore*, was absent too. In early 1970, Miles was recording stripped-down, jagged electric blues.

The bands varied. Just like in 1969, at no point did Miles record with his working band. He was chasing an explicitly rockist sound, and the key to achieving that was the electric guitar. Thus, the central figure of the 1970 sessions was, once again, John McLaughlin.

McLaughlin wasn't the only guitarist Miles worked with in 1970, though. The February 18 session is particularly interesting from a historical perspective, because it marks the only collaboration between Miles and Sonny Sharrock.

Out of everyone who entered Miles's orbit, Sharrock was probably the player most identified with the free jazz movement. He'd risen to prominence by alienating Herbie Mann fans with scorching, almost noise-rock solos, then joined Pharaoh Sanders for two landmark albums, *Tauhid* and *Izipho Zam*. He'd also recorded two albums, *Black Woman* and *Monkey-Pockie-Boo*, under his own name, and worked with saxophonists Byard Lancaster and Marzette Watts, among others. The key to his sound was a kind of fumblefingered strumming, combined with an aptitude for all manner of electronic distortion effects. His attack was rooted in R&B, but far from being the "Hendrix of jazz," as he was too often described, he was a real pioneer.

It's hard to understand what Miles wanted from Sharrock. He was pretty much buried in the ensemble: Not only was John McLaughlin still given the lead guitar role, but Sonny spent much of "Willie Nelson" (the only track to which he contributed) playing the Echoplex rather than the guitar. The noises he was making were hard to distinguish from those made by Chick Corea's electric piano. That's why for years, when Sharrock insisted he played uncredited on *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, it was ascribed to legend. You couldn't hear him, so maybe he was there, maybe he wasn't. Who could tell?

Included on the *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* box, though, are two inserts from "Willie Nelson." These tracks weren't complete takes of the song; rather, they were jams, recorded in case Teo Macero wanted to paste them in somewhere. (They wound up as part of "Yesternow.") On these recordings, McLaughlin and Sharrock both solo, above Dave Holland's pulsing five-note electric bassline and Jack DeJohnette's heavy rock beat, and Sonny definitely makes the most of the opportunity. It's really a shame that no completed tracks exist featuring the combination of Miles's biting trumpet and Sharrock's scorching guitar. (Just over a week later, on February 27, Davis re-recorded "Willie Nelson," stripping the band down even further. Bennie Maupin's bass clarinet and Chick Corea's electric piano were gone too, leaving only Steve Grossman's soprano sax and the McLaughlin-Holland-DeJohnette rock axis.)

This core quintet reconvened on March 3 and laid down several takes of a piece. All were eventually combined into "Go Ahead John," an epic that filled an entire side of *Big Fun*. The contrast between the raw takes and the final mixed version is startling. Each is different, but they all share a gutbucket blues feel. Miles is playing slow, mournful lines, matched by

sparse, machine-gun drum rattles from DeJohnette. Holland's bass is slightly distorted, and he doesn't play many fills, preferring to repeat one simple riff over and over, creating a trancelike feel. The only player who really goes out is—unsurprisingly—McLaughlin. His solos dominate many of the takes, and it was his playing that Macero fixed on to form the nucleus of the twenty-nine-minute final version of the piece.

In assembling "Go Ahead John," Macero didn't just string takes together randomly. He also put a singular, psychedelic post-production effect onto the tapes, which made the track sound like nothing else in Miles's catalog, or anywhere else. Macero switched McLaughlin's guitar and DeJohnette's drums repeatedly back and forth between the left and right speakers, creating the illusion that there were two drummers playing and making the guitar sound like a hornet trapped under a water glass. Miles's trumpet and Steve Grossman's soprano saxophone are left largely unretouched, except for a stretch in the middle of the piece where Macero plays two takes simultaneously—Davis can be heard playing against himself. It's one of the weirdest tracks in Miles's discography, a fantastic achievement in music *and* production.

The two side-long tracks that make up *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* are just as heavily edited as "Go Ahead John," though not as laden with post-production effects. At least twelve takes of "Right Off," the album's first half, were recorded on April 7. Macero then spliced four of these (takes 10, 10A, 11, and 12) together, almost exactly as they were initially laid to tape. Only the second half of take 11 (the third section) was used, and the introductory phrase of take 12 was looped, but otherwise it was a straight-ahead medley.

McLaughlin, Herbie Hancock, drummer Billy Cobham, and nineteen-year-old bassist Michael Henderson wham out the fantastic boogie riff that drives "Right Off." Henderson really steps out in style on his first session with Miles's band, falling right into line behind McLaughlin's flanged power chords. This rip-roaring opening inspires Miles to one of his longest and most complex solos on record. In a single, ten-minute take, he plays all over the horn, heading upward for notes he had rarely attempted previously and communicating all the aggression and discipline of championship-level boxing.

After that workout, a second, brief trumpet solo is pasted in as a sort of respite. Macero had requested an unaccompanied trumpet solo from Miles at a late-1969 session, and this is where he finally found a use for it.

Following that bridging device, the piece seems to start all over again. McLaughlin changes the riff; it's still a boogie, but it's even more aggressive than before. (In fact, the guitarist liked the new riff so much he stole it for "The Noonward Race" on the debut Mahavishnu Orchestra album, *The Inner Mounting Flame*.) In the second half of the piece, Herbie Hancock

makes his first appearance. He'd been on his way home, and stopped by the studio to say hello, whereupon Miles pointed at an organ and commanded that Herbie sit down and play. He did, coming in with a blast like he'd laid his elbow across the keyboard.

"Right Off" is a ferocious piece of music. It's nearly twenty-seven minutes long, and when it crashes to a halt, the feeling lingers that another twenty minutes would have been just fine.

More than the flipside of "Right Off," "Yesternow" is that track's opposite number too. For one thing, it's about half the speed. For another, its construction is vastly more complex. "Right Off" was composed of four different takes of "Right Off." By contrast, "Yesternow" should have been titled "Yesternow/Shhh/Peaceful/Willie Nelson," since it's a medley of all three of those pieces and more besides.

"Yesternow" isn't as guitar-driven as "Right Off." It opens with a slow, almost dubwise bassline from Michael Henderson. The band from "Right Off" is heard only for the first twelve minutes of the piece. Right in the middle of the track, "Yesternow" ends, and once again the unaccompanied November 1969 trumpet solo is used as a bridge, this time in the right channel only. On the left, a chunk of "Shhh/Peaceful" is inserted. It's jarring, because the sounds of the two sessions, the two bands, are so totally different from each other. When the ocean of electric pianos comes rippling in, it doesn't work well at all.

Fortunately, this passage is only about ninety seconds long. At fourteen minutes, "Yesternow" transforms into "Willie Nelson." The band then becomes Miles, Corea, Bennie Maupin on bass clarinet, Sharrock, McLaughlin, Dave Holland, and Jack DeJohnette. The last ten minutes of *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, then, are composed of portions of a complete take of "Willie Nelson" and excerpts from the two insert tracks described above. Finally, as the track winds down, the unaccompanied trumpet solo appears yet again, serving as a coda along with two more Macero ideas, one good, one bad. The bad idea is the insertion of a snatch of orchestra, which does even less for the group sound than the incongruous burst of "Shhh/Peaceful" had done a few minutes earlier. The good idea is the employment of actor Brock Peters, who narrated the film. He speaks only a few sentences:

> *I'm Jack Johnson, heavyweight champion of the world. I'm black. They never let me forget it. I'm black all right. I'll never let* them *forget it.*

Those words say a lot about where Miles was at, racially speaking, and where the country was too, in 1970. They provide the perfect capper to one of Davis's most powerful albums. *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* is a disc

that punches jazz forward, driving it toward fusion as if by a series of body blows.

Not everything Miles recorded in 1970 was hard-rocking. The May and June sessions found him laying down some bizarre experiments and a few tracks that were close to ambient music. On May 21 he stripped his band down to Keith Jarrett, McLaughlin, DeJohnette, and Airto Moreira, and recorded an epic, nearly seventeen-minute track, "Konda." It was recorded in five sections, assembled after the fact, and issued on *Directions*. On *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions*, a piano introduction, previously edited out, was restored. It didn't turn the track into anything interesting, though. As an experiment in mood, it was no "Shhh/Peaceful."

"Nem Um Talvez," "Selim," and "Little Church" were disappointments too. All were released on 1971's *Live-Evil*, bracketing some long edited medleys recorded live at the Cellar Door club in Washington, D.C. None of these short pieces has much going on in the way of improv; all three have strong, written-out melodies. They share a general absence of overt rhythmic impetus. (On "Little Church" and "Nem Um Talvez," there is no drumming, only Hermeto Pascoal's and Airto Moreira's percussion.) Because they're short, these tracks work well on *Live-Evil*. It's an ugly, disjointed album: The live tracks are sprawling and spiky at once, with instruments replacing each other in the mix rather than working together, McLaughlin's guitar chopping the air into fist-sized chunks, Miles's trumpet scoring the ear like acid eating patterns into a sheet of steel. The brief, gentle interludes help keep the record from being an unremitting assault on the listener.

"The Mask," a two-part track recorded on June 4, at Miles's last studio session of 1970, has no such saving grace; it *is* just an unremitting assault on the listener. The band was one of the largest Davis worked with that year—a nonet, featuring three keyboards for the first time in nearly a year. Corea, Jarrett, and Hancock all play, along with Steve Grossman's soprano saxophone, McLaughlin's guitar, Dave Holland on bass, Jack DeJohnette on drums, and Airto Moreira's percussion.

"The Mask" begins with keyboards that go so far beyond anything previously recorded in jazz, even by Sun Ra, that they're almost frightening. The foundation beneath this wild keyboard soloing feels more dangerous than rock-solid; the bass and drums go wild, making no effort to establish a coherent rhythm. It's practically noise music, and it's nearly eight minutes long—a brutal endurance test a lot closer to "Rated X" or the music that would be recorded for *On the Corner* two years later, than anything else Davis had created to date.

The second, much longer section of the piece is more interesting. It's propelled by a slow, walking bassline and a steady rhythm. Over this, Miles plays some nice stuff, much of it through the wah-wah pedal, with which

he'd just become infatuated. The keyboards and guitar are spacey and distorted, not really functioning as chordal milemarkers as much as creating sound effects around the edges. It's somewhere between "Yesternow" and "He Loved Him Madly," which would follow four years later, and could easily have found its way onto an album at the time.

But there's a good reason why the first half of "The Mask" stayed in the vault until 2003. Today it sounds forceful and commanding, like an attempt by Miles to intimidate the listener, and there's an audience for that. But in 1970, it would have cost him many more listeners than it gained him. Even people with a taste for free skronk, or the throbbing art-rock of the Velvet Underground and the Stooges, might well have quailed before the first part of "The Mask."

The *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* box also contains a clutch of tracks named (possibly posthumously) after other boxers: "Johnny Bratton," "Archie Moore," "Duran," "Sugar Ray," and "Ali." Some of these are quite good, and most have never been released.

"Archie Moore" is one of the most interesting. It's basically a hard-rock instrumental, with McLaughlin on guitar, Holland on bass, and DeJohnette on drums, and that's it. The track was recorded at the same session as "Go Ahead John," and it sounds like a warm-up for that piece, something McLaughlin led the rhythm section through while Miles and Steve Grossman were hanging out in the control room or whatever.

"Johnny Bratton" and "Sugar Ray" aren't great. They're both built around simple, repetitive basslines, but there's none of the tension found in later pieces. They don't sound hypnotic, they sound incomplete. On "Sugar Ray," Miles's solo is too minimal by half; he plays a series of variations on a melody but never even approaches the level of improvisation of which he's capable. "Johnny Bratton" is along the same lines. "Ali," though, is something. The key to most of these tracks, since Davis was working with such a minimal band, is the bass, and on "Ali" Holland is in top form. The bassline is a thick, funky throb, around which McLaughlin and keyboardists Jarrett and Herbie Hancock play grimy, bluesy lines. Miles's solo, too, is steeped in the blues. "Ali" could have filled the spot held by "Red China Blues" on *Get Up With It*, and everyone would have been better served.

Listening to *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions*, the inescapable conclusion is that back in 1970 Miles left his most overtly rock-influenced stuff on the shelf. Sure, "Right Off" is full-tilt boogie, but try to picture the jazz audience (and even the hip rockers who got on board after *In a Silent Way* and/or *Bitches Brew*) trying to get with "Ali" or "Johnny Bratton"—and forget "Archie Moore," on which Davis doesn't even play! In hip-hop terms, headz weren't ready. And Miles probably knew it, on some level. So instead

of hitting people with the raw, muddy blues he'd been laying down, he gave them complex studio-assembled creations. Harder-rocking than anything he'd put out before, yes, but still only half the knockout punch it *could* have been.

Of course, the symbolic value of *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* was anything but tentative. Miles's arched-back stance on the album cover, barefoot in leather pants and sleeveless T-shirt, said "combat" more than "music." The trumpet was a blowgun, firing poisoned darts at the audience—or anyone, it seems implied, who got in Miles's way, or in his face. Who was Jack Johnson, after all? A gigantic black man who drove fast cars, slept with white women, and kicked white men's asses. It's easy to imagine Davis making this record, even without a movie to accompany it.

A Tribute to Jack Johnson was Miles's first overtly hostile record. Even the beautiful things about it were thrown down like a gauntlet (or a boxing glove). And the follow-up was even more confrontational. The hyphen in *Live-Evil*'s title is misleading. It allows for the assumption that Davis is playing a word game, a misinterpretation supported by the track titles "Selim" and "Sivad." But the cartoon character from *On the Corner*'s inside jacket had it right, saying, "Miles is my main man—*Live and Evil*." That was the message of the double live album Davis recorded in December 1970. Here I am. I'm evil, I'm alive, and I'm in your face. Deal with it.

The music on *Live-Evil* boils over with sexual aggression. It's steeped in the blues, McLaughlin's guitar lines in particular. But it's not the mournful blues of the Delta. This is the strutting, cocksure blues of Muddy Waters's Chess recordings. Michael Henderson was utterly at home in this territory, and his pleasure is clearly audible. He locks right in with Jack DeJohnette, creating thick, funky grooves over which everyone solos brilliantly throughout the album's two discs. Gary Bartz, the latest man to fill the soprano saxophone slot (surprisingly, Miles let him play a little alto on the album too), is an unlikely highlight. Bartz's own group, NTU Troop, was more organic than Miles's band, combining African influences with free jazz. Still, he settles himself into the electronic stew very well, blowing fierce lines that perfectly complement Davis's harsh bursts of notes.

One of the most interesting things about the 1970–71 live band was what happened to Keith Jarrett after its dissolution. The keyboardist has been outspoken in the past about various disillusionments, small and large, he felt concerning his role in the band, the music they were playing, Miles's attitude toward him and others, and numerous other things. What's fun about reading Jarrett's comments in this or that Davis book, or hearing them in biographical documentaries, is finding out how differently everyone else who shared stages with him during this period feels about things. Mtume and Michael Henderson, in particular, seem to have felt that the

problems were mostly in Jarrett's head. The bassist recalls Miles deliberately telling him not to follow Jarrett when the keyboardist soloed, something which was sure to exacerbate discord, but also hinted where the trumpeter's loyalties lay, if it really came down to it.

Also, since his departure from Miles's employ, Jarrett has refused to touch an electric keyboard. This is too bad. He wasn't quite as wild as Chick Corea on the instrument, but his work with Davis was more than exploratory enough to make his retreat (and it sure feels like exactly that) into acoustic-only playing something of a disappointment.

Live-Evil isn't a perfect album. Most of its flaws are products of the editing desk, though, and not the Cellar Door's stage. The insertion of a slice of the studio recording of "Honky Tonk" into the middle of "Sivad" is clumsy and distracting. But the cumulative power of *Live-Evil*, particularly over long stretches of its bass-heavy, fractured funk medleys, remains impressive.

Live-Evil brings a discrete era of Miles Davis's music to a close. The core of this band would tour through early 1971, with a few players leaving and others joining, particularly drummers. Leon "Ndugu" Chancler, who'd played on Herbie Hancock's *Mwandishi* album, replaced Jack DeJohnette. Ramon "Tiki" Fulwood of Funkadelic also played with Miles for a gig or two. Airto Moreira left at the same time DeJohnette did, and his position took two new faces to fill: Mtume (who would stay until 1975) and Don Alias.

When Davis returned to the concert stage, in late 1972, he was in pursuit of an entirely new sound. The blues would disappear almost entirely from his music, replaced by a unique blend of hardcore George Clinton-esque funk, screaming noise/metal guitars, abstract electronics, and African percussion. But before that, he would return to the recording studio with nearly a dozen players in tow, and create something unprecedented: the utterly urban, jagged music of his most impenetrable, hostile album, *On the Corner*.

CHAPTER THREE
WHAT'S GOING ON

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT THAT MILES'S MOVE to electric music occurred between 1967 and 1969? In one sense, not very important at all: He made his move when the technology became available. But no artist works in a vacuum, and as much as he influenced the culture around him, Miles was influenced

by that culture. In the introduction to this book I wrote that everyone has his or her own Miles. I believe the same is true of the sixties. Each person's experiences during that chaotic decade-or-so were unique, as all our lives are, but the individuality which is a human birthright was compounded by the scope of social, political, and cultural change within the period (actually extending until about 1974) now known as "the sixties."

After all, if you were black, you experienced a very different sixties than if you were white. If you were rich, your sixties differed immeasurably from those of a poorer person. White men's experiences of the counterculture and of the mainstream were wildly divergent from, if not the opposite of, blacks' and women's. Joe Carducci discussed this in *Rock and the Pop Narcotic*:

> *Desegregation took place at a time when upper middle class white youth were creating a culture for themselves and buffaloing their elders into cultural submission. The problem this posed for the black underclass-to-be was that while well-educated young people of any race with solid ego structures may on the whole be able to calibrate the amount of free sex, birth control, psychotropic drugs, and television-saturated culture that they personally can handle without becoming pregnant, disease-ridden, drug-addicted criminals, all too often the lower class, under-educated, insecure young cannot . . . The generation gap was a relatively harmless, almost humorous indulgence in upper middle class white families. But in lower class families, especially black ones, it was no joke. Black adults knew that there would be little room for young blacks to bounce back from their new hip choices of drugs, radicalism, [and] free sex. Yet all they could do was watch because the young had cut them off culturally.*

The separation between young and old was but one of many schisms, large and small, in America during the sixties. For all the talk of unity that arose out of the decade's turbulence, it was actually the staging ground for what has become, in the twenty-first century, an incredibly balkanized America, wherein each group—racial, sexual, political—clings with white-knuckled fingers to a patch of ground often demarcated by issues of power, and its absence. You are defined by who you can claim is oppressing you, or who oppressed you in the past. Everything from affirmative action to campus speech codes can be traced back to the protests and struggles of the sixties.

Perhaps the most sweeping legacy of the decade, though, is the "red state/blue state" culture war, seen most clearly in the 2000 and 2004 Presidential elections. The "revolution" of the sixties didn't transform America into an enlightened-hedonists' paradise. Instead, it planted the seeds for the right-wing revolution that swept the nation in the early 1980s. The idea that the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll (not to mention the draft-

dodging and protesting) of a significant chunk of the sixties generation had profoundly negative consequences has only recently become intellectually fashionable. For years, few accepted the idea that "countercultural" values might have driven many people, even young people, into the backwoods, reactionary churches that now loom so large in contemporary American politics. But it's indisputable that the sixties created Trent Lott and George W. Bush as surely as they created Bill Clinton and John Kerry.

The sixties found Miles Davis fundamentally altering his music—not just its instrumentation, but its structure and the way it was recorded, released, and marketed. He changed the way he dressed, and who he associated with, too, moving outside the jazz scene to hang out with Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone, and marrying Betty Mabry, a woman roughly half his age. These things are all linked, but I don't think they were the *only* reasons he changed. Miles was hardly the kind of malleable spirit who would make changes, artistic or otherwise, merely to keep current with outside trends. He did what he wanted, and that made him hip no matter what decade was swirling around him.

Miles was a potent symbol of black cool in the fifties. His style, status, and talent all combined to make him a role model and a hero to many blacks and a dedicated cult of hipster whites. But as the fifties became the sixties, the definition of hip changed. It wasn't enough to be a genius musician; you had to be overtly antagonistic if you wanted to get over. The rebel posture took center stage in pop culture, and nothing's changed about that in the forty years since. The pop culture revolution started with rock 'n' roll, with Elvis's sneer and Jerry Lee Lewis' pumping piano, but it wasn't until marketers and advertising men recognized this sea change in American society that things *really* got rolling, and that was in the peak years of the sixties.

It's this simple: Advertising stopped selling conformity, and began selling individuality. The ad business had come into its own at the beginning of the twentieth century, and from the 1920s to the 1950s the message they'd hammered home, quite successfully, had been: Be In With The In Crowd—Buy This Car/Book/Pair of Pants. Don't Be Left Out. This didn't mean that the range of available products was limited. The opposite was true. But the sales pitch was about making sure you *didn't* stand out.

Beginning in the mid-sixties, that message was flipped on its head. The consumer was told, both subtly and explicitly, that self-expression was achievable, might indeed *only* be achievable, through the purchase of this or that car or book or pair of pants. Of course, it didn't stop there. As the years passed, the dominant trope in advertising became the encouragement of rebellion through consumption. People had been told that to buy the shoes or sunglasses on offer was to say something fundamental about themselves—now, though, they were told that the company already *knew* what

kind of people they were. They were rebels. Badasses. And they could prove it . . . by buying a new pair of shoes, and maybe some matching sunglasses.

The effect of this on pop culture, particularly the world of music, was seismic. The rebel posture quickly became the one almost guaranteed route to successful marketing of musicians, actors, even novelists. Norman Mailer. Hunter Thompson. The Rolling Stones. The MC5. Dennis Hopper. Jack Nicholson. And Miles Davis.

Miles was perfect for this kind of badass-worshipping media culture. He'd been a badass since the forties, using the word "motherfucker" like punctuation, turning his back on the crowd, getting clubbed by police in front of jazz clubs where he was the headliner. Contradictions abounded: He talked about wanting to die with his hands around a white man's throat, and about being able to tell what race a musician was by listening to them play, but some of the most productive musical relationships in his life were with white musicians—Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, Gil Evans, and many others—a fact he freely acknowledged. Once his band began playing loudly, on electric instruments, it seemed like a fairly simple matter to reinvent Miles Davis as the Dark Prince of Future Jazz. Get him onstage at the Fillmore, and let all those hippie kids see what a badass he is. And it worked pretty well.

In a Silent Way and *Bitches Brew* were reviewed in rock magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*, as described in the previous chapter. The consensus view was that hip record-buyers would want these records in their collections. Lester Bangs wrote that *In a Silent Way* was "neither jazz nor rock . . . a new music . . . a total art which knows no boundaries or categories, a new school run by geniuses indifferent to fashion." Bangs would go back and forth on Miles through the years, worshipping albums like *Sketches of Spain* and *Kind of Blue* but disdaining, or reacting in a very conflicted way to, more challenging works like *On the Corner*. Still, his words were indicative of rock critics' acceptance of Miles Davis as someone whose music was within their purview—a crucial hurdle in the expansion of his audience.

Make no mistake, though—Miles was being *forced* to find new venues in which to play. Without plugging in and courting new listeners, Miles would have been in trouble as the 1960s drew to a close. Jazz clubs across the country were shutting their doors. Some of the reasons for this were economic—since the 1950s, jazz had steadily lost market share to rock 'n' roll, and as the music was heard less and less on radio and television, it was consequently less and less of a draw in clubs. Booking became a war of attrition, with every act scrambling to get whatever was left out there.

It wasn't just lack of demand that drove clubs out of business. The social upheavals of the sixties took a heavy toll. Newark, New Jersey, for example, was a thriving metropolis and a decent place to hear jazz until the middle of the 1960s. Amiri Baraka had lived there, as had Hank Mobley. But

after the city was racked by riots, entire neighborhoods were burned out and never rebuilt. In that kind of environment, the jazz clubs were among the first places to go under, along with any number of other local businesses that simply couldn't sustain themselves. Only recently has the city undergone any kind of economic resurgence, and there's still a long way to go.

It's also worth remembering that the sheer amount of amplification Miles's new bands required made the move from jazz clubs to rock clubs necessary. Jazz clubs typically have small sound systems. A saxophonist or a trumpeter will be miked just enough to be heard over the drums within the tiny, enclosed space that is, say, the Village Vanguard. Miles had two electric pianists, an electric bassist, and a set of pedals and wires for his trumpet. No jazz club could present that music with any kind of sonic clarity; Miles and his guys would have roared through the place like a garage band, damaging as many ears as they opened up. The Fillmores East and West, venues used to the amplifier worship of acts like Jimi Hendrix, Neil Young, and Blue Cheer, were more than ready to handle Miles's comparatively modest power demands.

Crossing over (or, as some would have it, selling out) wasn't that easy, of course. Miles claimed to want financial success as much as, if not more than, artistic triumph. But his insistence on doing *everything* on his own terms often seemed to send him down paths as uncommercial as could be imagined. Miles's music was *his*. From the time he stepped out of Charlie Parker's band and became a leader under his own name, he never capitulated to anyone else's concepts. This included record executives, creative collaborators, and even festival organizers. Indeed, Miles became legendary for fighting with promoters and his label over money.

Perhaps more importantly, Miles's individualism didn't always endear him to other blacks. He was not what used to be called a "race man," the way Duke Ellington was. Davis made certain to present an image of himself as a successful, stylish black man, but it was rooted in personal pride, rather than racial solidarity or the idea of collective achievement. Miles's oft-expressed desire to be a hero to younger blacks—to be greeted like a boxer at his gym, was how he put it once—was more about his own ego than about group identity. This was a major reason why he spoke so negatively of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s, and the attempt by critics and a few performers to bind free jazz to militant politics. Miles wanted acceptance because he knew his own value as a person, not because of some abstract notion of equality.

Class was doubtless part of the problem. Miles's background was moneyed. Thus, he likely felt the frustration of an upper-class person confronted with prejudice. At the same time, part of him always wanted to be street, but never quite was. Maybe he coveted the admiration of ghetto

blacks because he knew he wasn't one, even though he could intimidate white people as easily as they could. Whatever the case, this was one of the central conflicts of Miles's life, and it was something he doesn't seem to have ever resolved.

To better understand what Miles was going through in the sixties, it's necessary to start with 1968. It was a year of riots and disturbance. The Chicago Democratic Convention, the Prague Spring, uprisings in Paris, Mexico City, and Japan: Some of this chaos was positive, even if it couldn't possibly have seemed that way at the time. The phrase "the whole world is watching" never again meant as much as it did when parents saw their children's skulls being cracked by Illinois cops, on live television. That display, though, signaled that the so-called "counterculture," or at any rate the anti-war movement, had panicked the government, forcing their hand and pushing them into a position of on-camera overreaction, which had disastrous effects. Even people who supported "law and order" had to wince at the treatment being meted out to America's youth.

Unfortunately, the events of 1968 were the decade's high point in terms of political achievement and general countercultural unity. In the two years that followed, hippie utopianism collided with the world's intransigence, and cracked wide open. The Vietnam War didn't end. Rock 'n' roll didn't change the world, and in December 1969 the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont Speedway proved that peace and love were not values shared by the entire rock community. By 1971, the dominant cultural mood among young, left-wing Americans was one of retreat. People began to shrink back from dreams of mass social change and clump together in much smaller, almost cultlike groups, effectively replacing "power to the people," as a slogan, with "do your own thing." Some, like the Weathermen, were driven mad by revolutionary fervor, pursuing an apocalyptic crusade for purity. Others vanished into the arms of fringe religious organizations like Peoples Temple and the Process Church of the Final Judgment. Still others fled to the hills to form communes. Basically, they did anything they could to escape increasingly intolerable realities.

Miles's music of 1968 reflected the decade's optimism. *Filles de Kilimanjaro* was more extreme, and possibly even more surprising to long-time listeners, than its predecessor *Miles in the Sky*, but both were explosions disguised as simmer. Without making much of it, Davis radically expanded his sonic palette. On the surface, all he'd done was exchange acoustic piano for Fender Rhodes, and upright bass for electric. But the rhythms constructed by Tony Williams and Ron Carter were so much more propulsive than the hardest-swinging stuff on *E.S.P.* or *Sorcerer* that tracks like "Frelon Brun" and "Stuff" sounded like a whole new band.

In a Silent Way and *Bitches Brew*, both recorded in 1969, were totally different records from the two that preceded *them*. Chick Corea, Dave

Holland, and Jack DeJohnette took Miles in directions no one listening even a year earlier would have anticipated. When the virtual army of contributors who popped up on the various 1969 sessions that produced *Bitches Brew* and *In a Silent Way* were added into the mix, the results were shocking. Some of the folks Miles was inviting into the studio—guitarist John McLaughlin and organist Larry Young in particular—were also friends of and occasional collaborators with Jimi Hendrix. These kinds of associations brought a fire that turned up in new Davis pieces like "Pharaoh's Dance" and "John McLaughlin."

At the same time, though, there was a calm at the center of the new music. It wasn't the same core of melancholy that fueled classic ballads like "My Funny Valentine" or "Stella by Starlight." Instead, it was a kind of Zen quietude, a sense that sometimes only a few notes were needed to communicate a huge idea. Miles surrounded himself with keyboardists—Chick Corea, Joe Zawinul, and Larry Young all played simultaneously on sections of *Bitches Brew*. Buoyed by their electronic chords, his trumpet floats like a tiny boat on a gently tossing ocean.

Another important milestone was his performance at the Isle of Wight Festival in England, on a bill with the Who, Jimi Hendrix, Sly and the Family Stone, Joni Mitchell, and other rock groups. Davis's band was the only non-rock act to perform at the festival. He'd missed the other major rock festivals of the Sixties. The day after Woodstock ended in upstate New York, in August 1969, Miles began recording *Bitches Brew* in Manhattan. It's interesting to wonder what the stoned, mud-soaked crowd would have made of Miles's live band of the time. Listening to the music performed that day by Santana, Sly and the Family Stone, and Hendrix, it's possible to imagine Davis and company receiving a favorable response. But it was not to be.

Altamont, the next epochal rock festival after Woodstock, started out as a fiasco and ended as a nightmare. It was, in fact, a hideous fuck-up, from the terrible location, chosen out of last-moment convenience, to the security provided by, of all possible bad options, the Hell's Angels. The bikers' eventual (some might say inevitable) murder of an audience member—three other people died at the festival, but only Meredith Hunter managed to do it on film—is considered in many quarters to be a crucial signifier of the Death of the Counterculture, or at least the moment when the hippies Lost Their Innocence. I'm not sure it's as significant as all that. If the hippie generation had forgotten it could be killed, an idea I dispute in light of the energy they expended resisting military service, then Hunter's death surely reminded them. But the idea of "lost innocence" posits a state of grace the claiming of which is both egocentric and corrupted by hindsight. Hippies were self-conscious in the extreme, and there was nothing innocent about their provocations (stylistic, rhetorical, political, sexual) of mainstream society.

Anyway, if it did go even halfway toward sounding the death knell for the counterculture, the bell definitely tolled for good at the Isle of Wight. Held just over a year after Woodstock, the gathering boasted an impressive roster of artists, most of whom tried hard to give the assembled masses what they wanted. The Who, for example, performed *Tommy* in its entirety as one-half of their set. But that wasn't enough, as the film of the event demonstrates. If the tragedy of Altamont was the result of a collision between the hippies and the Hell's Angels, the Isle of Wight was an ugly demonstration of hippies turning on, if not each other, the culture they professed to regard as a rallying point.

The festival was besieged by throngs of non-ticket-buyers who wanted to enjoy it on the Woodstock payment plan: They wanted to come in free of charge, like thousands of fence-flatteners and gate-crashers had a year earlier in upstate New York. What everyone shrugged off in 1969 (except the Woodstock promoters, who lost a bundle) had become the catalyst for serious, protracted, and vituperative conflict by 1970. Militant freeloaders tore at the fences and, once inside, heckled the performers for supporting the festival organizers. In the film, Joni Mitchell can be seen on the verge of tears as she attempts to complete her performance while arguing with an enraged, bellowing crowd.

It's hard to say what Miles made of any of this. He certainly got paid, regardless of what else went on. It's doubtful he would have taken the stage without getting the money up front, and had he showed up and had to take a bunch of attitude from some dirty-haired Euro-hippies talking about how "the music belongs to the people," it certainly would have been mentioned in his autobiography—it's not like he spared anybody *else's* feelings in that book.

The sixties seem now to be, above all else, a time when just about *everything* got politicized, from hairstyle and clothing to books, movies, and music. This wasn't a good thing. Politics is almost always the death of art, especially music. This is because of the fundamentally abstract nature of sound. Everyone hears music differently. But whether it's a military band or a socialist folk singer that does it, attempting to hammer home a political message through music is frequently an anti-art act of destruction the equal of blowing up a statue, or burning a painting.

Unfortunately, many musicians and critics believe the opposite to be true. Since the mid-1960s, "serious" rock artists have been expected to address social and political conditions in their lyrics, and the results are too often weighed down by cliché and oversimplification. Trying to wedge substantive thought into a blues chord progression and a rhyme scheme is tough stuff—compare Bob Dylan's "Masters of War" with Grand Funk Railroad's "People, Let's Stop the War" to understand how it should, and shouldn't, be done.

In the early 1970s, rock critic Lester Bangs, who was conflicted (at best) about rock bands fumbling with social significance, wrote, "Nowadays . . . it seems to be getting harder and harder for musical artists to gain true mass acceptance without at least a token mouthing of all the pieties that a large part of this generation totes around with them like a pocket rosary or spare hankie." For many of his peers, though, this was a *good* thing. So if you don't feel like blaming Dylan and the Beatles for rock's gradual, and often awkward, metamorphosis into Real Art, you can blame it on the first generation of rock critics.

The rock 'n' roll industry embraced this politicization, too—as long as it sold well. In Fred Goodman's *The Mansion on the Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen and the Head-On Collision of Rock and Commerce,* a Columbia Records publicist named Billy James is quoted as follows:

> *"I didn't believe in the dream of the Sixties," says James. "I had ten years on a lot of the people. The fact that kids could be dancing in a nightclub to music that had lyrics about a Welsh mining disaster was wonderful; the fact that meaning had been injected into a pop, essentially trivial medium thrilled me. All those notions were quite wonderful—but meaningless unless they were converted into hit records. That was my job, and I cared about my job."*

Jazz musicians suffered no such pressures—not from labels, anyway. Jazz was music first and a platform for extra-musical ideas second, if at all. The idea of having hit singles had long gone from corporate minds; jazz artists were viewed as loss leaders, signals that the label was committed to quality music and not just to shoveling out that rock 'n' roll crap the kids liked. Musically speaking, once bebop freed jazz from the obligation to be danceable, it entered a realm of near-total conceptual abstraction. Because rock is primarily a vocal music, with instrumental accompaniment forever in the service of the singer, the opposite is frequently true. Of course, there have been in the past communities of jazz listeners, and some musicians, who've attempted to politicize the music. This is particularly true of the free jazz scene centered in Greenwich Village (and, in the summer of 1969, Paris). Even as they donned dashikis and grew Afros, though, the free players were mostly reaching white listeners.

Miles was often loudly critical of the free jazz movement. In a *Down Beat* blindfold test conducted in 1968, he was scornful of Archie Shepp and Ornette Coleman, actually confusing the latter with the former and then denying that either one was making music of any significance or worth. In his autobiography, he said of Coleman's early music,

> *[P]eople went for that because people will go for anything they don't understand if it's got enough hype. They want to be hip, want always to be in on the new thing so they don't look unhip. White people are*

especially like that, particularly when a black person is doing something they don't understand. They don't want to have to admit that a black person could be doing something that they don't know about. Or that he could be maybe a little more—or a whole lot more—intelligent than them. They can't stand to admit that kind of shit to themselves, so they run around talking about how great it is until the next "new thing" comes along, and then the next and then the next and then the next. That's what I thought was happening when Ornette hit town.

And yet, despite the disdain in those words, there's some respect at the heart of his statement. The talk of intelligence indicates that Miles saw *something* worthwhile at work in Coleman's music, even if it wasn't his thing. And note that Miles's criticisms of free jazz always stayed within the realm of the musical. He never bothered criticizing other artists' politics, even if he didn't usually allow such things to clutter up *his* records.

Once you recognize that Miles only disliked the free players when he felt they'd failed artistically, it's not surprising that, between 1965 and 1969, his own bands quite often skirted the edges of free jazz, when they didn't go all the way "out." His last acoustic quintet broke standards apart and rebuilt them from the ground up, until tunes were barely recognizable. They pared melodies down to the barest skeletons, and juggled chords in ways unimagined by other bands of the time. While the group's album tracks stayed in the five- to ten-minute range, their concerts were another matter. No two versions of, say, "Stella by Starlight" or "No Blues" were alike—the *Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965* boxed set demonstrates this ably, as does the JMY release *No Blues*, recorded two years later. Some pieces stretched to nearly a half hour in live performance.

Few album cuts ever made the live set, anyway. Miles was still playing the standards he'd begun performing in the 1950s. "Agitation," from *E.S.P.*, was one of the few exceptions.

Miles's group wasn't overlooked at the time, but it's fair to argue it didn't get the attention it deserved. Albums like *Sorcerer* and *Nefertiti* stayed in print because of Miles's status with Columbia Records, but they were eclipsed by the masterworks of the 1950s. When Wynton Marsalis and other so-called "young lions" began playing music clearly derived from Davisian concepts in the early 1980s, a reassessment ensued among critics and jazz fans. At the time of their initial release, though, they were competing with reissues and archival releases of material Davis had recorded in the 1950s, not to mention the substantially more headline-grabbing electric records of 1969 and 1970. In a way, Miles's artistic profligacy undermined his artistic reception. So much material was being released, so fast, that it was extremely difficult for any but the most devoted fans to focus on each record as it appeared.

Perhaps realizing how thoroughly he was outdistancing his listeners, Miles disappeared from the studio for almost exactly two years after the sessions of 1970 that produced *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*. He chose to stay on the road, evolving his new band and his new sound, which would revolve more and more around Michael Henderson's thick, funky bass. But while he was taking the music to the people, many of his former sidemen began to step out on their own. Some, like Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, had solo careers dating back years, to the beginning of their tenure with Davis and even before. But those records hadn't been directly competitive with the material they recorded for the boss. Jazz fans liked Hancock's and Shorter's Blue Note albums *and* the Miles Davis Quintet releases, on Columbia. It all sold, to the loyalists.

It was another matter when Miles began to change his music and sell it not so much to the jazz public, but to young rock fans. He only had two years or so of attempting this gambit before his sidemen began leaving his employ and releasing their own electric albums. (Hancock and McLaughlin stuck around longer than Shorter did, contributing to *On the Corner*.) Three of the most important "spinoff" groups were Weather Report, Mwandishi, and the Mahavishnu Orchestra.

The first, self-titled Weather Report album was released in 1971. Wayne Shorter had left Miles's band in March 1970 and immediately formed the group with keyboardist/composer Joe Zawinul, percussionist Airto Moreira, and bassist Miroslav Vitous. All had previously worked with Davis. Not only was the record a collaborative effort by Miles's associates, it seemed directly derived from, or at least inspired by, work they'd done with him. Zawinul, one of the major forces behind *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*, had taken many of the swirling, atmospheric concepts on those records and incorporated them into Weather Report. With the notable exception of the conventionally beautiful "Orange Lady," which featured a melody Shorter had used on Miles's "Great Expectations" (unreleased until 1974's *Big Fun*), the debut Weather Report disc was an amorphous, experimental thing that sounded remarkably similar to what Miles had been doing two years earlier, with a little more overt commercial appeal. It wasn't as direct a challenge to the listener as Davis's albums had been.

Weather Report was never a band that set out to challenge its listeners—at least, not in the in-your-face way Miles's contemporaneous ensembles did. Compare what Davis was doing in 1974—*Dark Magus*—with what Weather Report offered that same year (*Mysterious Traveller*) and you hear two completely different concepts at work. Joe Zawinul was simply a more traditional, melody-minded player than Davis. The version of "In a Silent Way" on his 1970 album *Zawinul* perfectly encapsulates the difference between them. When Miles recorded it, he ignored Zawinul's chord-heavy intro, and turned the piece into a minimalist vamp, a skeletal framework for drifting, dreamlike

improvisation. Its composer, by contrast, recorded it the way he heard it: as a slightly mellow but multilayered and complex jazz instrumental.

Weather Report's membership fluctuated wildly from album to album. Zawinul and Shorter were the only two constants. The band's records dumped layer upon layer of melody and rhythm on the listener, and as the years went on the music got sweeter and poppier, mixing displays of tremendous instrumental prowess, particularly from bassist Jaco Pastorius, with an eagerness to get on the radio. There were always great tracks on every album ("Unknown Soldier" from 1972's *I Sing the Body Electric*, "Boogie Woogie Waltz" from 1973's *Sweetnighter*, "Nubian Sundance" from *Mysterious Traveller*), but most of their music just tried too hard and wanted too badly to be liked. With their sixth studio album, *Heavy Weather*, they got their wish. The song "Birdland," laden with hooks and ensemble virtuosity, became hugely popular. From there, it was straight on to the disco rhythms of 1978's *Mr. Gone*.

Herbie Hancock's first electronic project, Mwandishi, was weirder than Weather Report, and not nearly as obviously derived from Davisian concepts. In fact, the three Mwandishi albums were, and are, highlights of Hancock's discography as a leader. They combined a much more sophisticated funk than he'd produce with his next, much more successful band, the Headhunters, with sometimes genuinely bizarre electronic experimentalism. The group seemed to be feeling their way through a single, extended burst of activity. Their first, self-titled album, was recorded on New Year's Eve 1970. Its two follow-ups, *Crossings* and *Sextant*, were recorded in February 1972 and summer 1973, respectively.

Mwandishi was composed primarily of past, present, and future Davis sidemen. Bass clarinet player Bennie Maupin had appeared on *Bitches Brew*. Percussionist Leon "Ndugu" Chancler, a guest on the debut album, would tour as Miles's drummer during the fall of 1971. Trumpeter Eddie Henderson never played with Davis, but he knew him growing up, and his sound on the three Mwandishi albums (as well as his three solo discs, *Realization*, *Inside Out*, and *Sunburst*) is openly indebted to Miles.

"Ostinato (Suite For Angela)," the thirteen-minute throb that opens *Mwandishi*, combines the propulsive rhythms of "Pharaoh's Dance" with the casual, drifting feel of "Shhh/Peaceful." Fans of improbable cameos should note that "Ostinato" features rhythm guitar from 1970s hard rock monster Ronnie Montrose.

The dominant impression, when listening to Mwandishi, is one of in-the-moment communication between bandmembers, not of a producer cherry-picking moments of greatness from a sea of improvisation. The tracks weren't dependent on post-production editing the way Miles's concurrent work was. That's not a criticism of *In a Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew*, or *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*; it's just an observation about comparative working

methods. Hancock was still much more firmly wedded to the jazzist concept of nailing a perfect "take" than Miles was. Consequently, Mwandishi's pieces often feel like jams, particularly "Wandering Spirit Song," which closes the debut album. Though it's seasoned with electronics, it's mostly a vehicle for the horn section, a long, blaring workout driven by Billy Hart's crashing drums, more akin to Pharaoh Sanders's "Izipho Zam" or Frank Lowe's "In Trane's Name" than any jazz-fusion cut.

All three Mwandishi albums followed the same pattern. One side contained two pieces, each between ten and fifteen minutes long, and the other was taken up by a single long composition. On *Crossings*, recorded in February 1972 after the group had returned from an exhausting European tour, the long piece was the five-part "Sleeping Giant." Each of the track's movements flows naturally from what came before, but it's still easy to hear the band changing gears. Like the album as a whole, it's a strong, unified statement, demonstrating the increased dominance of electronics.

Hancock's electric piano and synths had been out there alone on *Mwandishi*. On *Crossings*, they were bolstered by Patrick Gleeson's Moog synthesizer. Some of the drum and horn sounds were electronically altered too, allowing cymbals or trumpet blasts to shimmer away into space. Still, every member of the ensemble is locked in at all times; there are no slack spots, even in the almost ambient closing track, "Water Torture."

Crossings wasn't a huge commercial success, and Hancock departed Warner Bros., recording the third and final Mwandishi album, 1973's *Sextant*, for Columbia. *Sextant* was recorded after Hancock had participated in Miles's sessions for *On the Corner*, and it feels that way. Although it's the most fully realized Mwandishi album, documenting a band that has really discovered its powers both in the studio and on the road, it's also the most dominated by electronics.

The opening cut, "Rain Dance," is a showcase for Hancock's synths. An array of science-fiction sounds, primitive drum machine clicks and pops reminiscent of vintage Atari video games, drifts out of the speakers. Bassist Buster Williams and drummer Billy Hart set up a groove beneath the noise, but the horns are only heard in brief accents. By the six-minute mark, all the organic instruments have faded away. Nobody's left but Hancock and Gleeson, firing ray-gun sound effects at each other while the drum machine ticks like a slowly cooling engine.

Sextant's final track, "Hornets," shows the influence of *On the Corner* most strongly. The feel is very similar to that of "Helen Butte/Mr. Freedom X," the twenty-three-minute jam that closes the Davis record. The whole band is grooving, with the synths providing weird rattles and pops as well as oozing electronic tones throughout.

After Mwandishi broke up, Hancock formed the Headhunters, inspired by Sly Stone, as well as his Buddhist (and professional) desire to please his

listeners. Their 1974 debut was wildly successful. The music was so heavily groove-oriented, it barely resembled jazz at all. In a weird and, one has to assume, deliberate irony, the jazziest track on *Head Hunters* is called "Sly." Though the Headhunters continued to release records through the mid-1970s, some with Hancock and some without, they became increasingly simplistic and dancefloor-oriented, and only on the Japanese double live album *Flood* did they get close to being as interesting as Mwandishi.

Two other bands orbiting Planet Miles were Tony Williams's Lifetime and John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra. The former was a trio featuring Larry Young's Hendrix-influenced organ, John McLaughlin's overdriven guitar, and Williams's drums and vocals. Their debut disc, *Emergency!*, was swathed in fuzz and echo, owing more to acid rock than to jazz.

Recorded in May 1969, between *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*, it showed a different side of Williams. The lyrics and vocals are pretty weak, but no worse than those proffered on lots of contemporaneous rock albums. The instrumental performances are noisy but highly technical beneath all the distortion, and the arrangements are sparse. In a jazz organ trio, the keyboardist is responsible for the bassline, but Young doesn't bother with it most of the time. Instead, he and McLaughlin trade solos throughout the seventy minutes of *Emergency!*. While the album isn't as over-the-top as McLaughlin's own *Devotion* or the Mahavishnu Orchestra's first three discs, it must certainly have surprised listeners who knew Tony Williams from Miles's quintet or all the Blue Note sessions he'd played on.

McLaughlin's relationship with Miles could be described as playing hard-to-get. This was out of loyalty to Williams. When McLaughlin first came to New York from England, it was at the drummer's invitation. But he visited Miles at home, in Williams's company, and as soon as introductions were made, courtship began. Davis began actively soliciting the guitarist for his own projects, with obvious success.

Moving into Miles's musical universe was greatly beneficial to McLaughlin's career. He'd already made two records under his own name in England, but neither was particularly well known. Upon arrival in America in February 1969, though, his career went into overdrive. In addition to playing on the first two Lifetime albums, with *Emergency!* still a career highlight, he recorded his third solo album. *Devotion* features organist Larry Young and drummer Buddy Miles. It was produced by then–Jimi Hendrix collaborator Alan Douglas and released in 1970. (While some recordings exist of a March 1969 Hendrix-McLaughlin studio jam, nothing official has ever been released.)

Like *Emergency!*, *Devotion* is basically a psychedelic hard rock record. Buddy Miles plays the same thudding beats he lay under Jimi Hendrix with the Band of Gypsys. Larry Young's organ is completely fuzzed out half the time; he sounds like he's auditioning for Iron Butterfly. Billy Rich plays the bass in rudimentary, mantralike fashion, keeping the music moving for-

ward but not doing much to ornament the simple arrangements. Douglas throws in occasional bursts of echo, and periodically overdubs a second lead guitar line so McLaughlin is dueling with himself. These are the most exciting moments. The album doesn't sound like anybody involved put a whole lot of effort into it. Its tracks seem like chunks of a single, epic jam session rather than individually conceived compositions. Still, it's a chance to hear McLaughlin at his most raucous and fire-breathing.

In 1971, McLaughlin formed the Mahavishnu Orchestra. They were hugely popular almost instantly. The music was aimed at white rock crowds, not the black funk fans Herbie Hancock pursued with the Headhunters. Their debut disc, *The Inner Mounting Flame*, sold very well, and before the end of the year the band was selling out concerts on bills with hard rock acts like ZZ Top and Aerosmith. Their second album, *Birds of Fire*, was also a huge success. In August 1973, the band recorded a live disc, *Between Nothingness and Eternity*, in New York's Central Park. Before the end of that year, though, the original members went their separate ways.

Twenty-five years later, the tapes for an unfinished third album were issued as *The Lost Trident Sessions*, named after the studio at which the group recorded. McLaughlin made three more albums with a second version of Mahavishnu in the latter half of the 1970s, but the first band's power was never matched.

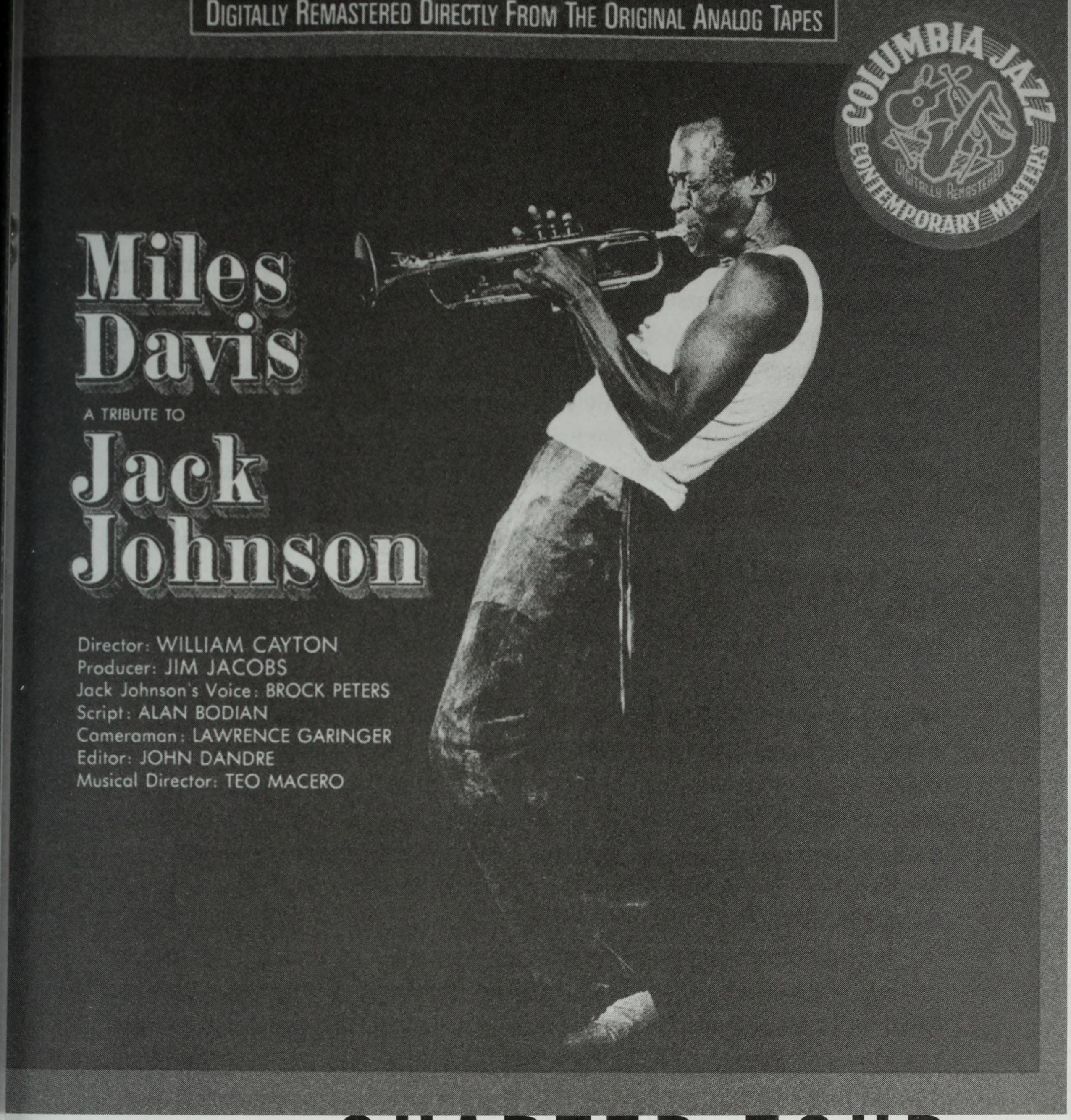
What put Mahavishnu over the top, commercially speaking, was precisely what took them out of the realm of jazz. While the live disc proves that improvisation played a large part in their sound, it was the riff-based jamming of a rock band, not the open-ended explorations of a jazz group. The group existed largely as a staging ground for McLaughlin's berserk guitar solos (often played on a double-neck Gibson like the one employed by Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page), which is exactly why they appealed to hard rock fans with a taste for adventure. They were much more in tune, sonically and spiritually, with prog-rock acts like Yes and the 1973–74 version of King Crimson than with any fusion outfit.

Everyone in the band, of course, was a top-flight player. Drummer Billy Cobham had played behind Miles in 1969 and 1970, on tracks that eventually appeared on *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* and *Big Fun*. His thundering beats kept Mahavishnu roaring forward at all times. Bassist Rick Laird locked in with Cobham, spinning airtight grooves at lightning speed. Violinist Jerry Goodman and keyboardist Jan Hammer (who would compose the *Miami Vice* theme a decade or so later) spun wild arpeggios above the crushing rhythm section. The whole ensemble was more than capable of overwhelming the listener's senses.

The best demonstration of Mahavishnu's astonishing rock power is "The Noonward Race," from *The Inner Mounting Flame*. Based on the same boogie riff that anchors "Right Off" from *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, it caroms from one astonishing solo to another, reaching its climax as practically a battle between Hammer's keyboards and Cobham's John Bonham-like drum assaults. Mahavishnu's music was really about as close to heavy metal as "jazz" ever got. Sure, a few genuinely lovely ballads litter their three studio discs. But it was at full roar that they achieved their greatest peaks.

It's hard to know what Miles thought of some of these projects. If there's a reverse chain of influence between all the fusion acts and his music, it's pretty well hidden. Pete Cosey's guitar pyrotechnics probably weren't there because Davis wanted to echo what he heard in Mahavishnu. It was just his attempt to get what he could have had, if his planned collaboration with Jimi Hendrix had ever come through. Indeed, Miles was moving in the opposite direction from many of his former sidemen, almost entirely abandoning the studio, post-*On the Corner*, in favor of evolving his music night by night, city by city, and releasing live records after the fact, to mark his trail so fans who didn't make the gig could at least make an

attempt to catch up. That flew right in the face of what the fusioneers were up to—Weather Report, in particular, having taken Miles's 1969–70 ideas of the studio as instrument firmly to heart. As ex-bandmembers got smoother and poppier, Miles got rawer and funkier. From 1972 to 1975, he was the hardest rocking man in the fusion business.



CHAPTER FOUR
MILES, JIMI, AND SLY

MILES FREQUENTLY SAID HE'D CHANGED music four or five times. That was true, but it took him fifty years. If he'd had less than a decade in which to work, he might have only done it once.

Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone changed music irrevocably too, but in a very short timespan and at almost the same time.

Hendrix flipped the rock world upside down and sideways in the five years between 1966 and his death in 1970, and left behind a hundred half-finished projects—he hadn't planned on exiting at twenty-seven. Sly managed an extra few years of meaningful productivity, rendering porous the boundaries between soul and rock until he burned himself out in 1973 or so. Sure, he staggered on until the early 1980s, but he was radioactive: Every time he put out an album, only half as many people cared as had the last time, if that many. (It's assumed that Sly's still alive, but he's not making music and he's not in contact with any of his former bandmates. In 2003, there was a report that ex-Family Stone players were making new music without him and keeping the electric piano plugged in, just in case, but nobody really expects him to return to public or creative life.)

Jimi Hendrix's influence on rock music can't really be overestimated. His guitar technique, and the context in which it appeared, ripped the floor from under the hippies around him. He took the art-pop fripperies of the British bands that were his contemporaries, and injected a lethal dose of power-blues courtesy of the three Kings (Albert, B.B., and Freddie) and Buddy Guy. He made records that slammed primal urges and fantasies of sci-fi/voodoo transfiguration through every gadget he could find. His command of feedback and fuzz was astonishing. He could create virtually any effect he desired, sculpting the unruliest of noises into heart-stoppingly beautiful poems of loneliness.

Before Hendrix appeared, rock had been virtually closed to blacks for some years. White performers acknowledged their debts to black predecessors through cover tunes and interview quotes, but no blacks stepped up, post-British Invasion, to fill the spots originally opened by Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Bo Diddley, among others. Instead, their creative energies were channeled into the vocal-oriented music of Stax and Motown. Hendrix, a black man playing an instrument, was emphatically a rock performer, beating the white boys at the guitar game in a way nobody would again until the Bad Brains assaulted the hardcore punk scene in the early 1980s.

Jimi was also a remarkably subtle songwriter, and over the span of his career he developed into a master of the recording studio. The differences between the adventurously noisy but stripped-down blues-rock of 1966's *Are You Experienced?* and the following year's poppier but still relatively simple *Axis: Bold as Love*, and the epic sonic vistas of *Electric Ladyland,* and the never-completed *First Rays of the New Rising Sun*, are nearly unfathomable. Tracks become exponentially more complex and layered, the latest technological effects filling in every inch of the mix to create near sensory overload. His songwriting developed from fairly simple three-chord, blues-based

workouts to ambitious psychedelic suites—and toward the end, he began blending rock with R&B, effectively anticipating George Clinton's musical question, "Who Says a Funk Band Can't Play Rock?"

Sly Stone's music, by contrast, contained almost no rock elements. He was a funk/R&B player, who occasionally dipped a toe into pop (a surprising cover of "Que Sera, Sera" on *Fresh*, for example). Sly was a captivating performer, though, and his songs were infectious enough that his music crossed over to the pop/rock mainstream with relative ease, fulfilling the vision expressed not only in his lyrics, but also in the sexual and racial makeup of his band.

The music on Sly and the Family Stone's three major records (*Stand!*, *There's a Riot Goin' On*, and *Fresh*) was brand new and as paradigmatic as Hendrix's. Maybe more so—a lot more folks have stolen openly from Sly's innovations than Jimi's over the years. Stone focused on groove more than almost any R&B act save James Brown, allowing his melodies to float on top of throbbing basslines and complex percussion patterns. Guitars were kept to a minimum, as in most pop-oriented black music. Sly's own electric piano carried the main themes of his songs, accented by the horn section and the call-and-response of the lead and background vocals. Like Hendrix, Stone was quick to embrace technology, especially when it saved him from having to interact with other human beings. Both *Riot* and *Fresh* featured early drum machines.

Sly's lyrical persona mixed the craftiness and cunning implied by his nickname with traditional R&B love-man postures. He wrote love songs, but often seemed to be commenting on them from one step to the side. And since, like Hendrix, he was in awe of Dylan, he often dealt in veiled autobiography or half-confessions. As Sly sank deeper and deeper into drugs and paranoia, and became more and more infatuated with the glamour of violence and the street life he sang about but had never truly lived, his songs became darker, bleaker, nearly nihilistic. This was reflected in the sound as well as the words, as the music became quieter, no longer dancefloor-friendly, and sometimes frankly menacing.

Hendrix evolved fast, but a growth curve was still very evident on his first two records as a leader. *Are You Experienced?* is a schizophrenic album. There are straightforward blues tunes ("Red House"), psychedelic dream-pop ("The Wind Cries Mary," "May This Be Love"), garage-rock nuggets ("I Don't Live Today," "Manic Depression"), jagged, almost funky hard rock songs ("Foxey Lady," "Purple Haze"), and experimental jams, utilizing the studio as fourth bandmember, which look forward to his later music ("Third Stone from the Sun," "Are You Experienced"). A lot of the album feels like a struggle on the part of Hendrix's manager, Chas Chandler, to

rein in the guitarist's wildest impulses while simultaneously showcasing enough of his talents to rocket him to stardom. The cumulative effect of *Are You Experienced?* was to announce, in no uncertain terms, that the stakes for rock guitarists had been upped, radically.

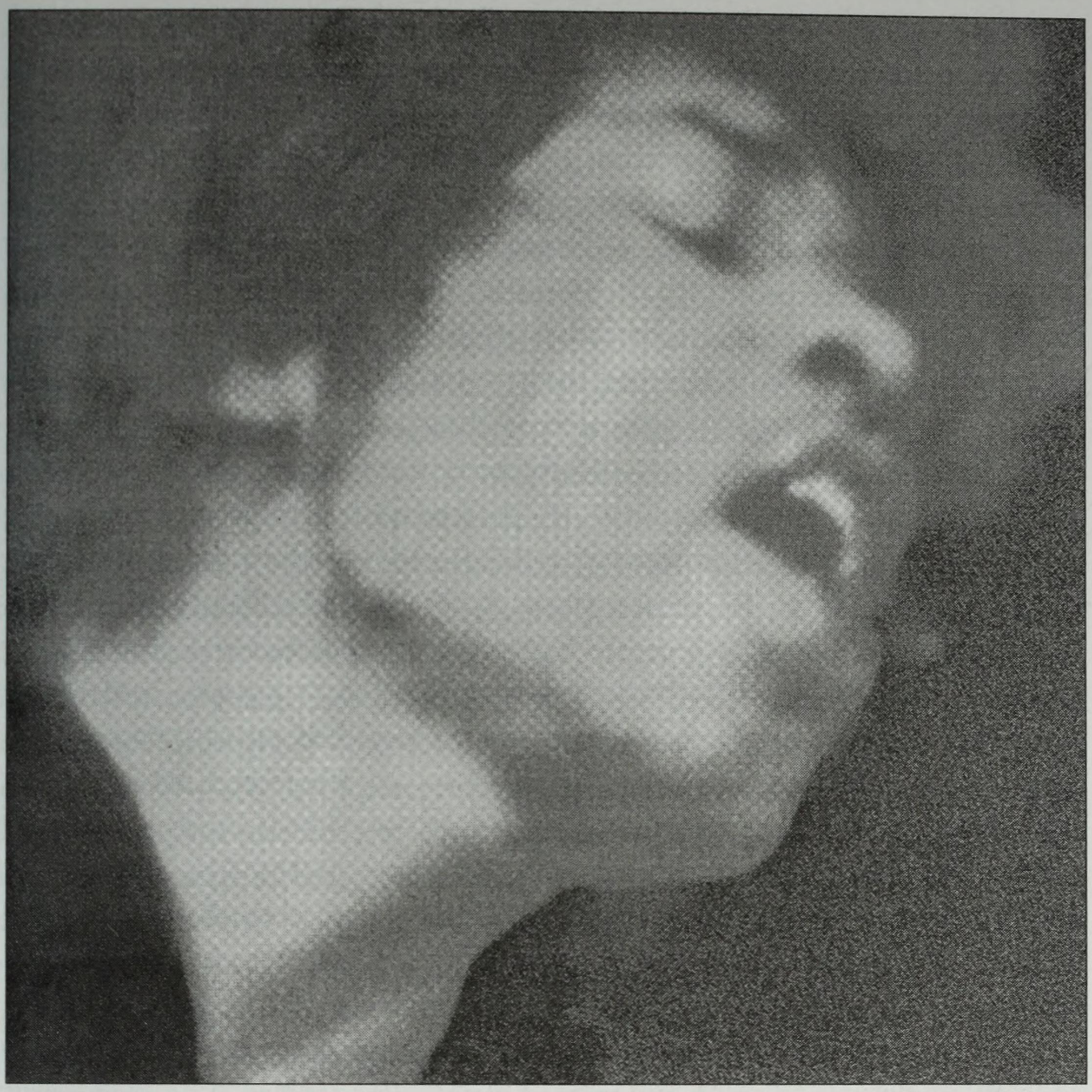
Prior to Hendrix's arrival, the role of the guitar solo (in rock, anyway) had been fairly limited. Players who wanted to stretch out tended to join one of the British blues bands. As far as the pop charts were concerned, guitars were for bolstering vocalists, and that was about it. Hendrix was one of the first rock players to make space—and lots of it—for solos in his songs. In so doing, he scared the hell out of every other guitarist in England, particularly so-called competitors like Pete Townshend and Eric Clapton.

Axis: Bold as Love was recorded in a hurry following the breakaway success of the debut, and it sounds that way. Most of the songs are under three minutes, and nearly all are significantly poppier than those on *Are You Experienced*. The record does contain "Little Wing," though, a lovely ballad that would be brought into the jazz book a few years later by bandleader/composer Gil Evans, who recorded orchestral arrangements of quite a few Hendrix tunes.

On his third album, *Electric Ladyland*, a full portrait of Hendrix really emerged. The recording process wasn't easy. The sessions were legendarily protracted and arduous, and featured an expanded pool of players. Indeed, so many people were brought in to help out with this or that, and Hendrix wound up doing so many things himself, that the record very nearly broke up the Experience, as bassist Noel Redding in particular began to feel inessential. It's easy to understand his feelings, but the finished record makes clear that he should have been grateful to be along for the ride.

Electric Ladyland opens with studio trickery (". . . And the Gods Made Love"), but the record quickly takes off with its title track, and taken as a whole, it's as firm a statement of artistic purpose as any in rock. There are many parallels between *Electric Ladyland* and Miles's *Bitches Brew*, recorded slightly over a year later. Both albums found their creators expanding the role and purpose of the guitar in the jazz and rock idioms respectively, and both were transitional efforts, documenting journeys as much as destinations.

Hendrix used the studio even more assiduously than Miles did. While Davis's producer, Teo Macero, mostly remained interested in constructing a performance by looping sections of a jam, or combining pieces of multiple performances to form a sort of "highlight reel," Jimi and engineer Eddie Kramer were onto something more ambitious. The pair used the latest technology to create music that couldn't possibly be reproduced in real time, whether it was by running tracks backwards, dubbing in background vocals so Hendrix was singing call-and-response with himself, or simply layering



track upon track of guitar until it would have required a Glenn Branca-like guitar orchestra to achieve the same effect onstage. At the same time, Hendrix's vision was deep enough that *Electric Ladyland* never sounds dated.

Hendrix began incorporating R&B into his songwriting at this time, much more emphatically than before. While he'd played hard rock guitar over Mitch Mitchell's jazz-influenced drumming on *Are You Experienced?* ("Third Stone from the Sun" and "Manic Depression" in particular), he hadn't really demonstrated the allegiance to his soul roots that manifested itself on his third album. The most obvious example was his cover of Earl King's "Come On," but some of Hendrix's own compositions began to show a strong R&B influence: "Electric Ladyland" and "Long Hot Summer Night" could have been sung by Marvin Gaye, or the Temptations.

Interestingly, Hendrix's next record was a (contractually obligated) live album, and it found him playing with a new band and a new sound at once. Not long after *Electric Ladyland*, Mitch Mitchell and Noel Redding departed. The pair were replaced by bassist and former Hendrix Army buddy Billy Cox and drummer Buddy Miles. This was an important step from a musical standpoint, but *not* from a socio-cultural one.

As he rose to prominence, Hendrix was subject to criticism from politically-minded blacks, some of whom felt that he was Tomming, mugging for white rock fans with his stage moves—humping the amplifiers, playing the guitar with his teeth, setting the guitar on fire, etc. He was also allegedly criticized for playing with white musicians, and playing "white" music rather than remaining firmly in the blues/R&B tradition, where he'd started. Racial and all other kinds of politics aside, the formation of the all-black Band of Gypsys *did* mark a major change in Hendrix's music.

The Band of Gypsys' music was even more soulful, and R&B-based, than Hendrix's earlier work. The songs were based on simple grooves, with lyrics much less based in psychedelic and sci-fi imagery than earlier records. The guitar solos were much more expansive, too; on the live *Band of Gypsys* album and its two-disc companion, *Live at the Fillmore East*, songs range from no less than five to, in some cases, nearly fifteen minutes. The centerpiece, and highlight, of the original record, "Machine Gun," is nearly twelve minutes long. Hendrix's guitar, fed through three pedals, imitates rockets and explosions, as Buddy Miles's drums rattle like the automatic weaponry of the song's title. The lyrics have the tone of a Civil War ballad, expressing a kind of fatalistic despair through the eyes of a nameless soldier. It's a staggering performance, and one that was never equaled again. *Live at the Fillmore East* contained two alternate takes of "Machine Gun," and Hendrix performed it again at the Isle of Wight Festival, but none of those versions have the impact, the spirit-searing melancholy, of the one released first.

The Band of Gypsys was Hendrix's big break from showmanship. While his stage tricks and outsized persona had enabled him to get attention quickly at the beginning of his career, by 1969 he was thoroughly tired of being perceived that way. His music had progressed, but many of his fans hadn't followed and were still expecting him to play "Purple Haze" and "Foxey Lady" and grind his hips against the amplifiers. While he never exhibited any resentment onstage, he must certainly have been chafing. At the band's only complete performances on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day 1969/1970, Hendrix stood nearly stock-still on the stage, focusing on his playing as he premiered a spate of brand-new songs. After the Band of Gypsys shows, Hendrix would continue to simply come onstage and play his music, and the audience would increasingly accept him as a musician, and not as much as a performer/entertainer.

Jimi's problems with race were multifaceted and intractable. Many hippies, eager to demonstrate their color-blindness, welcomed Hendrix into the rock scene as "neither white nor black." Treatment like that, though, is loaded with more than a little condescension and latent fear—yes, they seemed to say, Hendrix is definitely black, but he's not scary like the Panthers; he dresses hip, like us, and he listens to the Beatles. He's non-threatening.

Furthermore, that barbed embrace cost Jimi black listeners. Part of this was due to his label's marketing campaigns, and part of it, according to writer Greg Tate, was because he was a guitarist before he was a singer. Tate argues in his book *Midnight Lightning: Jimi Hendrix and the Black Experience* that the soul singer is the channel for the voice of God in black music, and the electric guitar, more than any other instrument, represents the antithesis of that. Whatever the case, toward the end of his career, after relocating from London to New York, he began playing benefits in Harlem and Newark, attempting to enter the community he'd, whether deliberately or not, pushed away for the crucial first two years of his pop-star life. Who knows what might have happened in the early 1970s; as Hendrix's music began to mix funk and rock more and more, he might well have reached Funkadelic heights within the black community. But at the time of his death, he was still definitely considered a "white folks' thing" in many quarters.

Hendrix was introduced to Miles in about 1969 by the trumpeter's then-wife, Betty Mabry. She was about half Davis's age and was neck-deep in the hip culture of the time—a part-time songwriter, among other things. It's said that *Bitches Brew* was titled in tribute to Mabry and two of her girlfriends. They were married for only a year, during which time it seems like each was unfaithful to the other. In his autobiography, Miles describes Mabry as "a high-class groupie, who was very talented but who didn't believe in her own talent." This seems dismissive and self-serving. She believed in her own talent enough to record four albums between 1970 and 1979, after all. The relationship between Miles and Jimi, by contrast, is portrayed in the trumpeter's autobiography as one of mutual respect, despite Mabry's rumored affair with the guitarist. Miles claims they threw ideas back and forth, and discusses—briefly, and again self-servingly—the collaborative recording session that was planned, but that never came together.

According to Alan Douglas, the session was planned, but fell apart at the last minute, because Miles called up demanding $50,000 before he'd set foot in the studio. Moments later (again, according to Douglas), drummer Tony Williams called up saying that if Miles was getting $50,000, then that's how much *he* wanted, too. All Miles says of the session is "[w]e had

come close once to [recording] with the producer Alan Douglas, but the money wasn't right or we were too busy to get it together."

The trouble is, the money probably wouldn't have been right even if Davis *didn't* call up making extravagant demands. John McLaughlin recorded two albums for Douglas, *Devotion* and *My Goals Beyond*. He has asserted in numerous interviews that not only were the records assembled without his input, but that he received no more than a few thousand dollars, up front, and the less said about royalties in the three decades the discs have been in print, on several labels, the better. Douglas' work with Hendrix has been similarly criticized, by the guitarist's family and by knowledgeable music fans. While Douglas had control of the Hendrix tape archive, albums were slapped together haphazardly, released with re-recorded backing tracks (a practice that continued all the way up to 1995), and generally treated less like art than like the eggs of the mythical golden goose.

So the story of the Miles/Jimi studio session is forever going to be hidden behind the obfuscatory, self-aggrandizing assertions of two extremely unreliable narrators. Jimi Hendrix, the third person who might have had something to say about it all, went to his grave without comment.

Beyond the collaboration that never quite materialized, Miles's and Jimi's worlds were closely linked by musicians they both knew, and in some cases both employed. McLaughlin and organist Larry Young were among these.

As discussed in the previous chapter, McLaughlin jammed with Hendrix in March of 1969, though the resultant recordings have not been released. Obviously, since both men were lead players, it was more a for-fun meeting of equals than even the most tentative move toward making any kind of collaborative record.

A few months later, at Woodstock, Hendrix was fronting an expanded band that didn't really have a name, but was called Gypsy Sun and Rainbows from the stage. That lineup featured Billy Cox on bass, Mitch Mitchell on drums, Jerry Velez and Jumma Santos on percussion, and Larry Lee on rhythm guitar. (Santos can be heard on at least one Miles Davis bootleg, from a concert in October 1970.) This was a time when Hendrix was attempting to stretch his sonic palette as well as his style, allowing his arrangements to take on a jazzier tone. Some of the new songs from this period, which later appeared on the posthumous albums *First Rays of the New Rising Sun* and *South Saturn Delta*, featured a much stronger improvisatory flavor than earlier, more hard rock-oriented material. Studio versions of some of these songs, including "Izabella," were recorded shortly after Woodstock with the same band, and are among Hendrix's most vital, living relics, much less dominated by technology than *Electric Ladyland*.

Right around the same time, Larry Young participated in the *Bitches Brew* sessions. The organist was commonly regarded as the Hendrix of his instrument, taking it into the outer reaches of free space. His own albums, particularly the Blue Note release *Unity* and his final recording as a leader, 1973's *Lawrence of Newark*, were often packed with floating jams influenced as much by African and Middle Eastern trance music as by jazz or rock. All these elements combined into a humming, percussive sound-stew that could make listeners lose track of time and place.

Young recorded on only one track with Hendrix that's been released commercially—the sludgy, trippy blues "It's Too Bad," which also features Buddy Miles on drums. Hearing Hendrix in this context is fascinating; like so many of the fragments the guitarist left behind, it opens a tiny window into one more possible world-that-might-have-been.

Another major musical figure who hovered, for a while at least, in the zone between Miles and Hendrix was arranger/composer Gil Evans. While Evans never worked with Hendrix in person, he began following the guitarist's music early on and transcribed some of it for jazz orchestra as early as the 1970s. Later, in the 1980s, he arranged and recorded a version of "Little Wing" with Sting on vocals, which was highly praised by critics. Evans, of course, was known for his series of collaborative albums with Miles, and in fact worked with the trumpeter all the way up to 1982's *Star People*.

Miles's use of guitars in his music from *Bitches Brew* on was explicitly influenced by Hendrix, a fact he acknowledged in his autobiography. Prior to 1969, he'd used the instrument primarily as a bonus set of guide-chords, like George Benson's contributions to "Paraphernalia" and "Side Car II" (from *Miles in the Sky* and *Circle in the Round*, respectively), or as a drone, as in the case of Joe Beck's playing on the 1967 "Water on the Pond" and "Circle in the Round," which appeared on *Directions* and *Circle in the Round*. But when McLaughlin joined the group, it was pretty much understood that he was there to fill the Hendrix spot.

On *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*, McLaughlin was often overshadowed by the many layers of electric piano, rhythm, and other horns—that Miles was stacking up in the studio. But by the stripped-down quintet and sextet sessions that produced *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, he was dominating the proceedings more often than not. In fact, "Archie Moore," on which McLaughlin, Dave Holland, and Jack DeJohnette become a blues-rock power trio, grinding out nearly five minutes of screaming proto-metal noise, is one of the highlights of the *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* box.

Hendrix's influence became even more obvious from 1973 to 1975, when Miles formed what became known as his "funk band." The primary

guitarist during those years was Pete Cosey, a Chicago blues player who'd appeared on the controversial Muddy Waters disc *Electric Mud*, from 1968. Like many Delta players of prior generations, Cosey played sitting down, but unlike them, he incorporated multiple pedals and other electronic devices into his sound. Backed up by rhythm guitarist Reggie Lucas, Cosey was able to go wild, and did so to fantastic effect. The band's headlong jams would rise to a crescendo, and with a hand signal or a nod, Miles would cut the whole thing off, dropping away every instrument but the one he wanted to hear—which, more often than not, was either Dave Liebman's (and later Sonny Fortune's) saxophone, or Pete Cosey's guitar. In the silence, Cosey would tear up and down the fretboard, spitting tongues of fire from his amplifiers in a post-Hendrixian blare that, while it could seem both overwhelming and intimidatingly freeform, also demonstrated extraordinary subtlety. Every note he played was worth hearing, and it all added not only to the physicality of the piece, but to its core of diamondlike beauty.

The best direct comparison between the Davis funk band and Hendrix is with the expanded ensemble Jimi took to Woodstock. Like Reggie Lucas with Davis, rhythm guitarist Larry Lee's job was to bolster the group sound so that Hendrix could solo unfettered, if he so chose.

Sadly, only careful listening reveals the genuine radicalism of Hendrix's vision on the Woodstock tapes. The engineers who recorded his performance didn't do a very good job of miking the percussionists, and seemed intent on reducing the group to just another hard-rock band. There are a few studio tracks, recorded a day or two before the festival, that display the real range of this expanded Hendrix band much more accurately. "Message to the Universe" (which, with the Band of Gypsys, would be retitled "Message to Love") and "Izabella" find him making music much more influenced by soul and, yes, jazz than anything he'd ever done with the Experience. Indeed, the rhythm guitar and percussion Hendrix adds to his former lineup brings him close to what Curtis Mayfield would be doing, on the soundtrack to *Superfly* among other albums, a few years later.

Miles's funk band had some of the same interplay between rhythm guitar and percussion, but Al Foster's backbeat was much closer to Buddy Miles's heavy foot than Mitch Mitchell's baroque, whack-everything-in-sight, jazz-meets-prog-rock style. The sound Miles achieved was much more headlong, even brutal, than Hendrix's music, which shifted subtly from one riff, one rhythm, to another. Also, Miles's band wasn't as totally led by the lead guitar as Hendrix's. It wasn't really *led* by anybody. Miles conducted, indicating the beginnings of pieces with trumpet phrases used as cues, and then each bandmember soloed, in jazz fashion. Without the usual verse-chorus structure in place, pieces were infinitely more elastic, even when

driven by a funk-metal drummer, than any rock song. In fact, it might be easier to draw parallels between Miles's funk band and the Funkadelic of the early 1970s. Onstage, that band combined its songs into long jamming medleys, organized by rhyming, often audience-participation/call-and-response chants and framing epic solos, particularly by lead guitarists Eddie Hazel and Michael Hampton.

The influence of Sly Stone's music on Miles didn't show up until later—1971 or even 1972. But Stone, as an innovator, was important to Davis as early as 1968. Those were the years in which Miles was being nudged, mostly by Tony Williams, toward the exploration of pop/soul rhythms. This new influence is apparent on "Stuff," from *Miles in the Sky*, and "Frelon Brun (Brown Hornet)," from *Filles de Kilimanjaro*.

Sly and the Family Stone were the brainchild of the band's leader. A Texan who moved to San Francisco and became a DJ, he had a radio-man's instinct for what would work with listeners but an individual vision which overrode that whenever necessary. Still, the band's first three albums were relatively negligible, from both artistic and commercial standpoints. It wasn't until 1968's *Stand!* that they came into their own.

Stand! begins inauspiciously. The title track, for most of its length, is a slightly tedious chant-along with boring positive-mental-attitude lyrics. But out of nowhere, just over two minutes into the piece, a staggering, breath-taking groove appears and guides the song to its conclusion. The riff has nothing to do with the song as it's existed to that point, but it redeems the whole number by its sheer funky majesty.

The next track, "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey," is an early flowering of Sly's weirdness. While its message, illuminated short-and-sweet in the title phrase and its response, "Don't call me whitey, nigger," is clear enough, the song dissolves quickly into what can be fairly described as a psychedelic-blues morass. A distorted sound that could be a harmonica, or just an incredibly warped vocal, or both, freestyles over a beat for nearly five minutes. More weirdness abounds on "Somebody's Watching You," which is fortunately followed by the monster groove of "Sing a Simple Song." That song is tempered by bizarre touches too, though, particularly the amelodic shouts of Rose Stone and the breakdown, during which (following the title's advice) the whole band sings "Do re mi fa so la ti do."

Stand!'s three hit singles—the title track, "I Want to Take You Higher" and "Everyday People"—are actually some of the album's low points (the aforementioned "Stand!" groove excepted). The best thing about the Family Stone is the interplay between Stone's electric piano, Larry Graham's bass, and Greg Errico's drums, and it's audible on the most groove-oriented tracks, in particular the nearly fourteen-minute "Sex Machine." This

rhythm section, assisted by the horn section, crawls right under the listener's skin throughout the disc. If half this album sounds familiar the first time you hear it, that's no surprise; it's all been sampled on an uncountable number of hip-hop records.

Stone took two years to deliver a follow-up to the massively popular *Stand!* Those were years he apparently spent in a haze of drugs, sex, paranoia, and violence. Bandmembers holed up in Sly's house/studio, waiting hours at a time for him to get stoned enough to feel creative, and bearing the brunt of his rage if they weren't ready to give him exactly what he wanted at the instant he wanted it. The months of fractious, tense recording and re-recording finally yielded *There's a Riot Goin' On*.

Riot was a much more introverted, downbeat record than its predecessor. The arrangements are radically stripped-down. Instruments come to the fore, play a small figure, and then vanish into the haze. The same is true of the lyrics. Sly doesn't seem to have the energy or desire to write anthems, the way he did on earlier records. And the performances, particularly the vocals, are as subdued as the arrangements. When I listen to tracks like "Just Like a Baby" or "Poet," it sounds like Stone is whispering right into my headphones. And of course, the album's single, "Family Affair," doesn't sound like a band performance at all. There are no horns, no (live) drums, no bass. There's nothing but electric piano, a little bit of guitar, drum machine, and vocals by Sly and sister Rose. This track, and "Time," prefigure Prince's bassless, studio-created sound on "When Doves Cry" from his *Purple Rain* album.

As cryptic and menacing as *Riot* is, there are still high points. If it's possible to pinpoint a specific song from where Herbie Hancock pilfered the sound of the Headhunters, it's definitely "Africa Talks to You 'The Asphalt Jungle.'" Not coincidentally, the track also sounds like one of the only full-band performances on the disc. (Part of the reason for *Riot*'s legendarily thin sound is that Sly's obsessive re-recording and overdubbing wore the tapes down. This could be why even some of the tracks that feature live drummers sound like mechanical rhythms.)

Sly's drug problems didn't get any better with the release of *There's a Riot Goin' On*; in fact, in the months afterward, they got worse, to the point that the band finally began to fall apart. Bassist Larry Graham was the first to go, and his absence is the first thing that leaps out from the grooves of *Fresh*. The 1973 album was Sly's last significant record, and while it's very different from each of its two predecessors, it's still a major funk statement.

On *Fresh*, Stone got further from soul/R&B than he ever had. Along with James Brown and George Clinton, he was at the vanguard of establishing funk as its own music, which is what it would be for much of the

1970s, even during the rise of disco. The grooves on tracks like "In Time," "If You Want Me to Stay," and "Thankful 'N Thoughtful" were much more staccato and syncopated than anything coming out of soul music. In fact, it's hard to imagine anyone trying to dance to Stone's 1973 tracks. This was funk not as impulsive ass-shaking music, but as art; it worked its magic as much by implication as by overt rhythmic or melodic assertiveness.

The clear parallel is the change, in about 1990, in the way hip-hop records were structured. From the music's beginnings in the mid-1970s until the late 1980s, hip-hop beats were infectiously funky, and you could dance to them. Somewhere along the line, though, that stopped. The last hip-hop song I can remember as being genuinely danceable was Chubb Rock's "Treat 'Em Right." After that, and even while that song was still popular, the beats underpinning rap tracks slowed down, and not slowly or incrementally. (Maybe Cypress Hill is to blame; they were certainly one of the most prominent acts to pull this trick.) Hip-hop went from being a music you danced to, to being a music you nodded your head to, wearing headphones. It went from extroverted to introspective, seemingly overnight. (Hip-hop has lately become dance music again, but the trend I describe lasted a long time.) The same is true of Sly and the Family Stone's *Fresh*.

It should also be noted that *Fresh* was the last album credited to the Family Stone. When Sly returned with *Heard Ya Missed Me, Well I'm Back*, it was entirely under his own banner, and that wasn't a good thing. Most people agree that album's title is totally untrue; he wasn't back, not musically anyhow, and not many had missed him. But for five or six years between 1968 and 1973, Sly Stone was one of the most important performers in pop/soul/R&B/funk/whatever. Like James Brown and George Clinton (and Jimi Hendrix and Miles Davis), he carved a path people are still traveling.

One of the major differences between Stone and Hendrix was the lyrical voice each man adopted. Jimi Hendrix belonged to a science-fiction tradition in black music. Many of his songs were about an almost cosmic sense of displacement, about alien-ness as metaphor. The track "EXP," which opens his second album, *Axis: Bold as Love*, is a skit involving a TV interview with a purported expert on UFOs, who seems to reveal himself as an alien live on the air. On *Electric Ladyland*, the song "1983 (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)" describes an apocalyptic scenario, in which Hendrix and his woman take to the oceans following the destruction of the earth by mankind.

Several other songs deal with more fantastic themes. Underneath the psychedelic trappings, much of Hendrix's lyrical output was firmly within the category of black spiritualism and dealt with transcendence—escaping

the pain of real life (as a black man in America, and a black man in "white man's music") into some imagined other world.

Many other major black music figures have dealt in this sort of fantasy/science fiction escapism. Probably the most notable two are George Clinton and Sun Ra.

Clinton's groups Parliament and Funkadelic dealt heavily in a mythology of his own invention. Parliament's albums charted the battles between the Star Child, descended to earth from the Mothership to give the people funk, and Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk, who was out to destroy or subvert the groove. This reached its apotheosis on the album *Mothership Connection* and its attendant tour, during which Clinton descended to the stage from a mammoth UFO every night. Funkadelic was a little more earthbound, but they still sang songs depicting everything from "Wars of Armageddon" to a pregnant Mother Earth, "knocked up" by mankind, on albums like *Cosmic Slop* and *Maggot Brain*.

Sun Ra's cosmology was even more complex than Clinton's. He claimed to be from Saturn and released many albums on his own El Saturn label. Though his Arkestras played jazz, it was a weird, spacey jazz that alternated between ultra-abstract free blowouts (with, beginning in the early 1970s, extremely bizarre synthesizer work from Ra himself) and churning, grooving big-band charts. In his youth, Ra had worked with famous bandleader Fletcher Henderson, and that influence lingered in his work for his entire life. Many of his compositions featured vocals, and the lyrics were almost always in the realm of science fiction as religion, UFOs as vehicles come to save black people from their earthly torments. This message became explicit in the twisted blaxploitation musical *Space Is the Place*, that Ra and company made in the 1970s.

While Hendrix didn't wed his sci-fi ideas to black militancy the way Clinton and Ra did, the general theme remained the same. And post-Hendrix, it persists in the lyrics of rap groups like OutKast (who called an early single "ATLiens," referring both to their hometown of Atlanta and their interest in outer space) and Kool Keith, and the music and imagery of nearly uncategorizable artists like DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid, who takes the latter half of his name from William Burroughs, another man who turned science-fiction tropes to extremely personal and unsettling ends.

Sly Stone wrote no such otherworldly themes into his music. He was very much an earthbound R&B singer, combining a political and social awareness equal to, if not as literal as, Curtis Mayfield's, with a loverman side like Marvin Gaye's. He tended to express political thought in simple singalongs like "Everyday People" or "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey," while his love songs were much more emotionally complex and subtle. "If You Want Me to Stay" is one of the most ambivalent love songs around.

Stone's lyrical style is rooted in the blues, with its almost journalistic, deadpan approach to emotional and social problems. His sensibility was slightly more ironic and self-deprecating than those who'd come before him, though. The love songs of, say, Smokey Robinson, for all their word-play, were deadly earnest. Stone's lyrics, by contrast, were more plainspoken and yet contained a sizable dose of self-aware wit.

Miles Davis was possibly more obsessed with Sly Stone's music than with Jimi Hendrix's. While he admired the guitarist and wanted to work with him, he seemed to approach Stone's music not only as a fan but as a student, in search of ideas. He also admired Stone's ability to reach young, black listeners, something he clearly wanted to do himself.

In the early 1970s (post–*Jack Johnson*), Davis fixated somewhat on Stone. His saxophonist at the time, Dave Liebman, recalls being invited to the trumpeter's home to listen to Stone tracks, over and over again. Davis was particularly fascinated by Stone's use of rhythm, and he incorporated some of the other man's ideas into his own music. For example, the drum and percussion track from "In Time," the opening cut of *Fresh*, shows up behind "On the Corner/New York Girl/Thinkin' One Thing and Doin' Another," the medley that begins *On the Corner*. (Though Davis was listening to tapes of what became *Fresh* while preparing to record *On the Corner*, the relative slowness of Sly's creative process, compared to Miles's, allowed the trumpeter's album to arrive in stores first.)

Other Davis tracks from the time, like "Honky Tonk," also seemed to bear the mark of Sly Stone's music. It wasn't that Miles took anything overt, like a bass sound or a keyboard riff. It was the feel he was after: funk, and the subversion of funk, at the same time.

Stone's grooves were addictive, but in their sparse structure they worked in direct opposition to notions of funk as laid down by James Brown and George Clinton. Where those men worked with large, organic ensembles, Sly built his tracks layer-by-layer, often doing most of the work himself and only calling up bandmembers to punch in a horn chart or some background vocals on the chorus. This was particularly true of *Fresh*, the album from which Miles seemed to take the most inspiration.

Davis's personal relationship with Stone was minimal, despite the musical interest. The two got together a few times but never even made plans to record together. In his autobiography, the trumpeter wrote,

> *The people at Columbia who own Epic—the label Sly was on—wanted to see if I could get Sly to record quicker. But Sly had his own way of writing music. He got his inspiration from the people in his group. When he wrote something he would write the music to be played live, rather than for a studio. After he got big he always had all these people around*

his house and at his recording sessions. I went to a couple and there were nothing but girls everywhere and coke, bodyguards with guns, looking all evil. I told him I couldn't do nothing with him—told Columbia I couldn't make him record any quicker. We snorted some coke together and that was it.

People connected with Stone spoke of Miles showing up at the house, around the time *There's a Riot Goin' On* was being pieced together, and playing some chords on Sly's electric piano that disturbed him. In a rage, Sly threw Miles out of the house.

Sly had the same problematic personality Miles had; he wanted to be perceived not only as a musical genius, but as a bad motherfucker too. This fueled his drugging, his violence toward women, his attraction to larger men than himself (with guns), and everything else: the late or cancelled performances, the endless and frustrating recording sessions, the whole package. But because the atmosphere of indulgence surrounding rock and pop musicians, particularly successful ones, is so much worse than that which surrounds jazz musicians, the personality traits that built the Davis legend utterly destroyed Stone. He self-immolated, because he wouldn't allow anyone who disagreed with him to hang around for long. Miles could be an asshole, and a self-destructive one at that, but his openness to outside ideas and opinions, musical and otherwise, likely saved him more than a few times. Stone didn't have that, and he spiraled to oblivion as the 1970s wore on. No honest observer expects to hear from Sly Stone ever again.

Though Miles, Jimi, and Sly made very different music, there is a weird similarity among them. The voice each employed (Miles's "voice" being, obviously, his trumpet sound) was a tender, soft one, albeit with an edge that could cut deeply when necessary.

Hendrix was said to be very sensitive about his voice. Though he didn't like the way he sounded initially, he became the frontman of his band, virtually by default. Of course, his voice was perfectly adequate to his material, most of the time, and what he couldn't achieve with anything like technical perfection, he forced into shape with the emotional force of the bluesman. The perfect example is "Machine Gun," from the *Band of Gypsys* album. There are some melodic lines—"Machine gun, tearin' my body all apart," "I'll pick up my ax and fight like a farmer"—that Hendrix sings in a caterwauling, totally off-key voice that would get most singers, rock or any other genre you care to name, laughed off the stage. But in the context of the song, bolstered by Buddy Miles's rattling drum attack in particular, and his firestorm of guitar sounds, he manages to make it work.

On other tunes, particularly on his more highly polished studio albums (*Axis: Bold as Love* and *Electric Ladyland*), Hendrix could use his somewhat limited vocal range to great, soulful effect. His cover of Earl King's "Come On" is an excellent example of this, as are "Voodoo Chile" and, from the earlier record, "Little Wing." He puts lyrics across through insinuation and implication, bringing the listener in almost like he's folding a long, skinny arm across your shoulders to tell you a story.

Sly Stone had a slightly less limited vocal range, though he certainly wasn't a gospelized belter like Sam Cooke. But, being a genius, he created perfect musical backdrops for himself. Sometimes his voice wasn't even the lead one on songs; he'd let the bandmembers chant slogans and fill in the rest with horn charts and bass breaks. But on later records, when he did come to the forefront, he created a persona unprecedented in soul music, one almost entirely dependent on technology.

In earlier days, when tunes were cut pretty much live to two-track, singers of every genre had to be able to knock the walls down with their voices. They might have been recording in a separate booth from the band, but they were still competing for space. By the late sixties, though, it was all about the overdubs and the mix. Sly was able to construct his tracks from top to bottom, one instrument at a time (when he was limiting himself to electric piano, drum machine, and skeletal guitar and bass figures, this didn't necessarily have to take long—of course, his drugging ensured that it *did*) and nestle his voice right in the middle of that pillow-pile of sound. He didn't have to sing loudly. He could whisper his lyrics into the microphone, and patch them in just the way he wanted them. This is what gives his vocals the sort of smirking, self-aware quality they possess on *There's a Riot Goin' On* and *Fresh*.

Miles achieved the same effect with his use of the Harmon mute. In the 1950s, when his quintet was recording for Prestige, he created a unique trumpet voice by playing his ballads with the mute nearly touching the microphone head. His tone was pinched and sharp, nearly shrill sometimes, and every run was accompanied by the hiss of air coming through the small hole in the mute's center. Years later, in his electric period, he would combine the mute with amplification, and then with a guitarist's wah-wah pedal, and the resultant sound was even more startling. Miles's horn could sound like a crying baby trapped down a well, or like a shimmering ribbon of steel that would slice your face open if you came too close—or both at once. And when he slowed down and played the blues, whether on *Live-Evil* or *Star People*, it could break your heart.

In the mid-1980s, Miles became enraptured by Prince. He planned to collaborate with the Minneapolis-based performer in the studio and

incorporated two or three Prince compositions into his live sets. Miles even performed a song or two with Prince's band, at a New Year's Eve party in 1987. The full-on collaboration, like the one with Hendrix, never came off, but it's easy to imagine what drew Miles to Prince's music.

Prince, at the time, was a sort of amalgam or alloy of post-Hendrix guitar and Stone-styled funk. That wasn't the limit of it, of course; in 1980s postmodernist style, he lifted tricks from many of the major black pop performers who'd come before him, from Little Richard to James Brown. As the decades have gone on, Prince has released enough albums that he can be said to have a style that's identifiably his, but it's still possible to reverse-engineer his songs and figure out where he lifted this or that from. Indeed, at cynical moments it's possible to wonder whether Prince would even have a career, had Hendrix not died and Stone not burned himself out with free-base and madness.

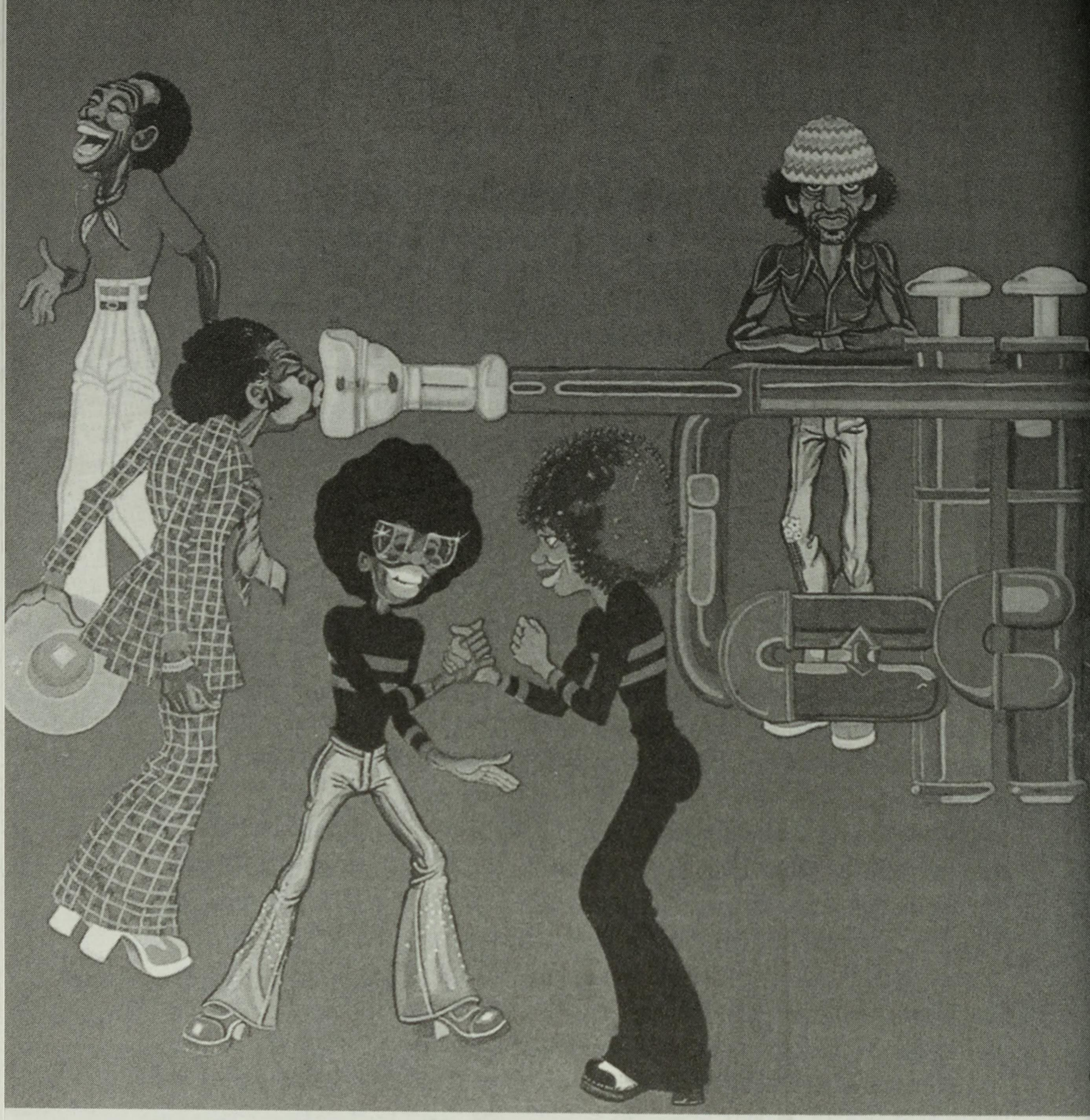
Still, what Miles admired in Prince emerged in his own music over time, in the late 1980s, and it became an important component of his style. During those years, Miles was creating a brand new style out of elements from pop, rock, funk, R&B, jazz, go-go, and zouk. Thus, to take inspiration from Prince—who was doing something similar from a pop standpoint, even dabbling in jazz on his "Black Album" and *Lovesexy*—was obvious. But Miles still had enough creative juice to make something entirely new out of the sounds he heard around him. He wasn't just playing over a go-go rhythm like trying on a new pair of pants.

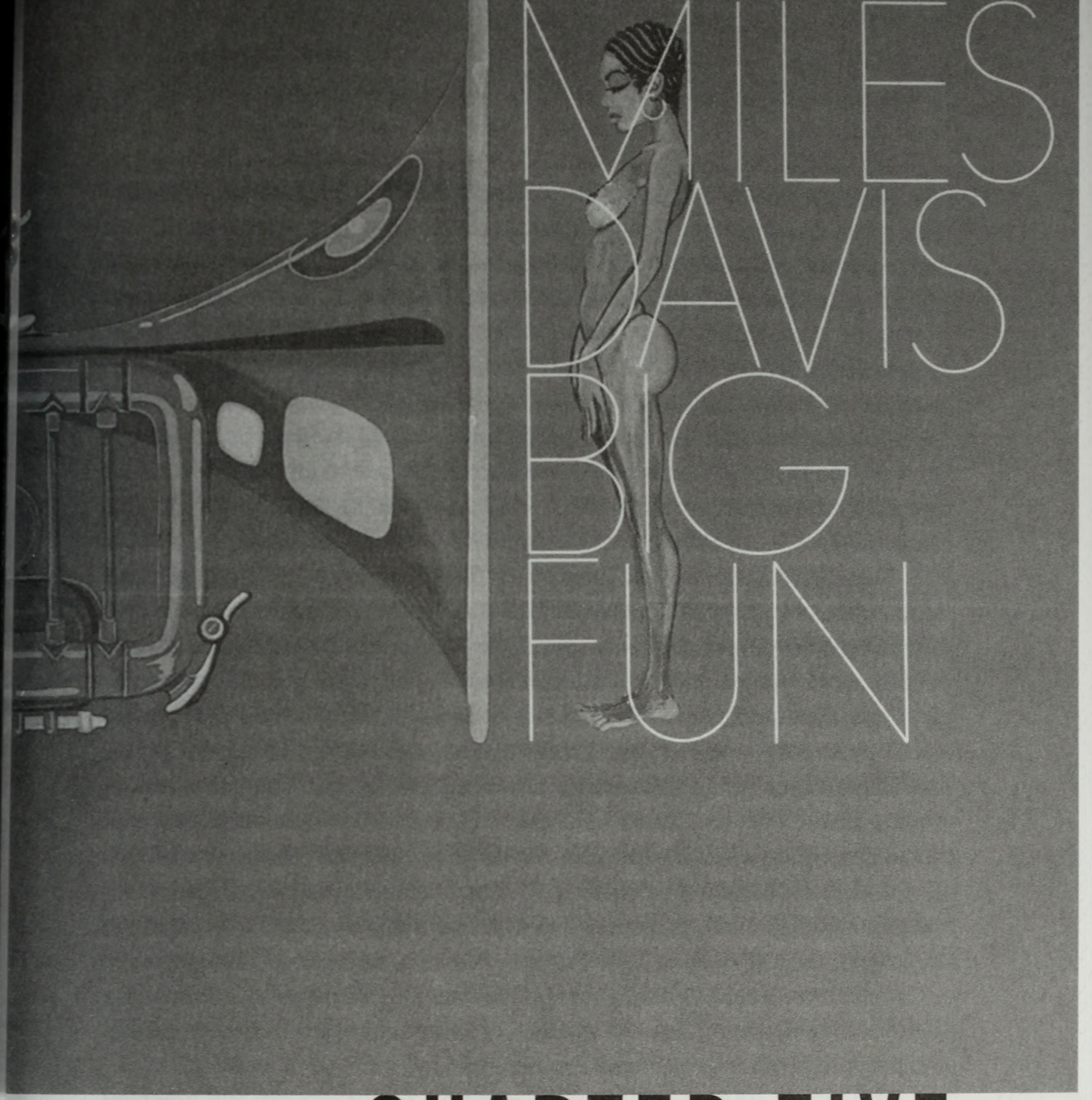
Anyhow, by the end of the eighties, even Prince couldn't save black pop from dying the death of a thousand cuts (and scratches). Hip-hop had thoroughly taken over by 1990; it seems now like no R&B single can climb the charts without a guest appearance by some rapper or another. This spells death for black pop as a creative music.

Sure, hip-hop's fun to listen to. A dozen or so singles every year manage to recombine sounds in ways that bring a grin of recognition as well as a shiver of pleasant surprise. But that's not creation, it's scavenging. Without the work of predecessors available for cannibalization, hip-hop cannot continue to exist. And so the concern becomes one of time; how long until the race to the bottom of the sample-source barrel is reached? The only group to address this in any serious, long-term manner has been the Roots, who play simplistic funk grooves on live instruments. It's a noble gesture, and if they ever actually came up with a captivating melody, they'd probably emerge as major artists.

It seems that Miles's first burst of electric creativity came at the tail end of black pop's golden age. Sly Stone and Jimi Hendrix (and George Clinton and James Brown and Stevie Wonder and others) were stretching music,

embracing technology and infusing it with their own organic genius, and creating the foundations of funk. These days, those records mark the line where the wave crashed and rolled back, and the hip-hop producers scrabble through what's left behind, picking up one gleaming fragment after another, holding it up to the light for a minute, then moving on. But it doesn't feel like there's another wave coming.





CHAPTER FIVE

MILES AND TEO

MILES DAVIS FED ON CONFLICT. He routinely pitted band-members against one another, or gave advice (solicited and otherwise) in the form of insults. When John Coltrane explained his lengthy solos to Davis by confessing he sometimes didn't know how to wind them down, the trumpeter's response was, "Try taking the horn out of your mouth."

Another incident occurred in the early 1970s. Saxophonist Gary Bartz told Miles he didn't like what Keith Jarrett was playing behind him. When Bartz left the room, Davis immediately called the keyboardist in and told him the saxophonist *loved* his playing, and wanted to hear even *more*. At the same time, Miles was telling other members of the group—bassist Michael Henderson in particular—not to follow Jarrett out when he began playing the classically influenced improvisations the trumpeter called "Catholic-school shit." Given this atmosphere of deliberately fostered tension, it's no surprise that, after he left, Jarrett expressed ambivalence about the music he'd made with Miles. It could even have been a factor in his decision to renounce the electric keyboard forever afterward.

These episodes, and all the others like them, can be interpreted as Miles's attempt to get the best out of his players, to shove them out of comfort zones and toward greater inspiration. But in light of his contemptuous treatment of women and non-musicians throughout his life, it's easy to see simple sadism and perversity at work too. Miles liked to see how far he could push people and situations, on and off the bandstand.

There was a lot of this pushing and shoving—emotional, intellectual and on rare occasions physical—in the relationship between Davis and producer Teo Macero, with whom he worked from the late 1950s until 1982. The best-known fight took place at the beginning of the *Bitches Brew* sessions, in August 1969. Miles wanted Macero's secretary fired for some reason. The producer refused. Davis taunted Macero, trying to get him to come out of the booth and fight, but that didn't happen either. During the actual recording, though, Teo did emerge, leaning against Miles, with all his weight, while the trumpeter was recording.

This was neither their first nor last fight. One track on *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* begins with Teo asking, over the intercom, if the piece the band is about to play is Part Four, and Miles hisses, quite angrily, "It's Part Nine, motherfucker! Who gives a fuck what number it is?" In 1964, Miles had attempted to have Macero fired from Columbia Records, for assembling and releasing the album *Quiet Nights* without consulting him. And yet, not that many years later, Macero was asserting that he had virtual carte blanche in assembling the fragments of music that became *Bitches Brew*, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, *Live-Evil*, and even *On the Corner*. He admitted that the final approval had to come from Miles, of course.

The work Miles and Teo did was incredibly important. Not only did they radically expand the range of acceptable instruments, they brought the producer to the forefront in a way that was unprecedented, and brand new, in jazz.

Prior to Macero's work with Davis, the role of a jazz producer was to be an invisible guiding hand. Blue Note albums of the 1950s and 1960s, for

example, often say "Produced by Alfred Lion" on their sleeves, but Lion was primarily interested in making sure the music got down on tape. The man responsible for the actual sound was engineer Rudy Van Gelder, who built the studio in which hundreds of jazz albums were, and continue to be, recorded over the decades.

Among the jazz public, and the critics, there was a nearly religious attachment to the idea that jazz recordings should be perfect single takes. Overdubs and edits were perceived by many as practically sacrilegious, injurious to the purity of the jazz experience. Because of this thinking, jazz was relatively virgin territory for producers until well into the 1960s. The idea that edits and overdubs could be used as compositional tools was nearly unheard of.

There were exceptions, of course. On *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, Charles Mingus inserted Spanish guitar as a bridging device between two sections of a larger piece. That was in 1963. And on the posthumously released 1965 track "Living Space," two John Coltranes can be heard, playing a soprano saxophone duet. But what Miles and Teo accomplished was qualitatively different from, and of a higher order than, these experiments.

The construction of albums like *Bitches Brew*, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* and *On the Corner* is astonishing in its complexity. The sheer magnitude of the task Macero set himself (for all the obsessive hours and days and weeks of listening, all the tape-slicing, all the pushing of music through this and that machine, was all his part of the process), is enough to make most people run home screaming. "Pharaoh's Dance," as has been mentioned, contains a section in which a *one-second* piece of music is repeated five times. How does one even conceive of doing such a thing? How is it physically accomplished, particularly in the analog razor-blade-and-Scotch-tape era? Exactly how long is the piece of tape that contains *one second* of music?

It's a measure of how powerful Miles and Teo's achievement was that jazz's commitment to "live-in-the-studio" recording seems as weird as it now does. The one-take technique makes what was once a technical limitation into a fetish. Louis Armstrong *had* to record everything in complete run-throughs; overdubbing didn't exist at the time. But it does now, and calling the refusal to employ available technology "romantic" is extremely charitable.

Until the late 1960s, jazz records existed as documents of events. Musicians gathered in a recording studio, often in a single room, and played tunes, improvising each time in pursuit of the best possible version. Today, multitrack recording is often employed. Members of jazz groups still record together, but they work from individual rooms, soundproofed and separated by Plexiglas windows. This is almost solely for the purpose of mixing after the fact, though—making one instrument louder or softer

Live, early 1970s

than the others in order to balance the final piece. It's hardly ever done to allow overdubs. Jazz's philosophical attachment to documentary reality lingers.

When he adopted overdubbing and post-production editing as primary components of his aesthetic strategy, Miles declared war on the mythology of jazz, as embodied in all the recordings that had come before. He'd been editing and fixing his tracks since the Gil Evans sessions of the 1950s, but those were "polishing-up" edits, done in order to achieve a more perfect-sounding performance of extremely difficult music. Thelonious Monk had done the same thing, when his band proved incapable of recording a beginning-to-end take of "Brilliant Corners" that satisfied him.

The edits on *In a Silent Way*, though, were different. They weren't meant to convince anyone that the music they were hearing had really happened like that. Instead, the goal was exactly the opposite, to create a piece of music that couldn't have been achieved any other way.

Since the late 1950s, pop and rock producers have embraced technological advances virtually the minute they were available—indeed, some of them invented new recording and engineering methods along their way to the ideal sound. Overdubbing and editing became routine tools of the trade early on, and they've never been abandoned. During the subsequent decades, though, the increased profile of rock criticism fueled a new self-consciousness among rock bands, which in turn spawned an ever-increasing dependence on technology—for a while.

The pop music industry was unused to being the subject of serious pseudo-academic scrutiny as occurred in the pages of *Rolling Stone*, *Creem*, *Crawdaddy*, and other journals. Flattered, many of the artists began to take themselves as seriously as the critics took them. This isn't to suggest that bands in the late 1960s and early 1970s were in thrall to rock critics or took their career guidance from them. (That wouldn't happen until a few years later, when critics Jon Landau and Dave Marsh began the process of molding Bruce Springsteen, arguably the first postmodern American rock hero.) But as rock music expanded its sonic palette, critics embraced their efforts, placing albums like *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *Pet Sounds* into the pantheon they were assembling.

The honeymoon didn't last long. In the 1970s, with the rise of the progressive rock movement and wildly popular arena rock acts like Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, not to mention chart-topping bands like Fleetwood Mac and the Eagles, many critics began to turn against the aesthetic concepts they'd espoused only a few years earlier. The prevailing line became that rock had grown soulless and bloated, that the music had lost touch with its populist roots. This conclusion was based more in critical solipsism than in accurate observation of the rock scene, since the very bands decried as elitist were the most popular. Still, it dovetailed with the rise of a small but highly publicized technological backlash, in the form of punk rock.

Punk bands took pride in sonic, lyrical, and sartorial crudity, and began traveling backward, abandoning gadgetry as they went, in search of some romanticized, mythical "realness" supposedly missing from the more polished records being made by bigger acts. Most punk records were made using overdubs and editing, of course, albeit not as much as, say, the Eagles or Electric Light Orchestra. Some bands made the decision to record in full takes, the same way early rock 'n' roll bands had done, but this was done for romantic rather than economic reasons. As in jazz, the belief was that a "real" performance was more "honest" than one that had been fiddled with in post-production.

The idea that a record should accurately document a musical performance seems rooted in a psychological need for honesty and a corresponding suspicion of trickery on the part of pop performers. Of course, there was the common belief among jazz musicians that pop was a lesser form, something beneath them, but that was combined with a disdain for the "impure" method of recording with overdubs.

The jazz attitude is that performances laid live to tape prove that the musicians in question can play a song beautifully every time and make it new and interesting every time too. This is, of course, a myth: Many jazz boxed sets are littered with flubbed takes and false starts. (Charlie Parker has an entire mini-discography of nothing but this sort of stuff.)

The flip side of this belief is the idea that musicians who assemble their tracks from the best fragments after multiple incomplete takes, or—worse yet—the recording of individual instruments separately of one another, are somehow cheating, as if the process of making albums has an ethical dimension.

For the most part, this idea holds no sway in pop. Pop music is about the eternal Now. A record is not perceived as having any existence outside of itself. There is no larger context, only the gleaming moment. This is why pop's ideal medium of transmission is the single. Even with singles making up a smaller and smaller chunk of overall record sales, they are, because of radio and MTV, still the way people hear pop music. Albums by pop artists are rarely, if ever, solid, coherent efforts from beginning to end. In the majority of cases, they feature three or four singles or single-quality tracks, and six or eight clearly substandard, placeholder songs padding out the CD to a releasable length. This is even truer in the MP3 era, when listeners burn the individual songs they like to their iPods and trade them on the internet.

In this market, compilations are a far safer bet than albums. The K-Tel company realized this in the 1970s, and the British have seemingly always known it. A series of pop compilations called *Now That's What I Call Music* has, within the last few years, made a sizable impression on the U.S. pop charts. Each volume collates the biggest pop singles of the months leading up to its release. At this writing, around twenty American volumes have been released. In the U.K., by contrast, the series is near sixty volumes deep.

In both the U.S. and U.K., the series' cover art reflects this pop worldview. The word "Now" is printed four or five times larger than the rest of the title put together, equaled in size only by the volume number. Thus the series asserts itself as a sequence of moments, a parade of nows: Now 1, Now 2, Now 50, and so on. But even as it's superseded by the next volume, each *Now* lingers, preserved in digital amber, an "eternal Now." And if one had the whole series loaded in an iPod, simply pressing "shuffle" would amount to the creation of a time machine, rocketing the listener back and forth from the "now" that was five, or ten, years ago forward to the "now" of *now*, the compilation perhaps purchased that very week.

Of course, as mentioned, the singles compiled on the *Now* discs were several months old by the time the CD hit stores, so even when the cover explicitly states it's the sound of "now," the listener was still playing catch-up. Or archiving. In pop, we are all librarians, whether we're preserving yesterday or 1965.

For even as pop is apparently about moments, each replacing the one before into the vastness of time, the pop audience reacts in a seemingly oppositional way. People buy singles and, years after their initial release, haul them out and play them, in fits of nostalgia for the time in their life when that song was new. Sometimes the point isn't to conjure up the par-

ticular memory of a first kiss, a wedding, or a college relationship, but to attempt the reclamation of the mindset—usually an imagined innocence—of a younger self.

Jazz does not hold the same sway over our memories. Something in it distances itself from the emotional territory pop stakes out in the mind. This is partly because of the relationship jazz has built up with its audience over the decades, in the post-rock 'n' roll era. With the rise of rock 'n' roll as the most popular music in America, jazz's audience diminished. At the same time, jazz changed; it became less danceable, less a physical pleasure than an intellectual one. In this way, jazz separated itself from the pressures of existing in the Now.

Miles's albums from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s seemed to explicitly deny the existence of any "now," at least as far as the recording process was concerned. He argued, through his work, that studio albums had no obligation to replicate real events, that they could be elaborate constructs, faithful only to their own internal logic. It was like the difference between landscape painting or portraiture and Abstract Expressionism. Miles felt no need to offer raw, or even slightly polished, reality. Why settle, when better, more vivid options were available?

This makes some of Miles's reissue box sets, *The Complete In a Silent Way Sessions* and *The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions* in particular, problematic. Jazz boxes are traditionally organized in chronological fashion, with takes of a tune following one another, the master take usually coming first, followed by various alternate versions and, in some cases, fragments and false starts. Thus, it's possible to assemble slightly different versions of albums, if the listener prefers, say, Take 11 of a piece to the Take 10 that might have been initially released.

Miles and Teo's working methods make this impossible. There are no complete takes of "Pharaoh's Dance" or "Bitches Brew." Instead, there are hours of loose, unstructured jams—reel upon reel of fragments. Macero culled the highlights and spliced them together into suites of sound. Thus, the released version of *Bitches Brew* is simultaneously the *only* version and a false one—a fictional Now that cannot be refuted.

Miles and Teo abandoned the idea of "honesty" in studio recordings. They chose to assert that the record was the record, a work unto itself; if a listener felt like hearing interactive performances by a group of musicians, well, that's what concerts were for.

In adopting this strategy, they created a permanent schism between records and live appearances. Certain effects and sounds were simply impossible to replicate onstage, like the switching from side to side of John McLaughlin's guitar and Billy Cobham's drums on "Go Ahead John," or the shift from a rock-oriented quintet to an ocean of electric piano on "Yesternow." But it's interesting to note that after disbanding the

Shorter/Corea/Holland/DeJohnette quintet, Miles's bands began attempting more assiduously to duplicate *some* of the rapid shifts occurring on the studio albums. By the early 1970s, the band was doing an excellent job of approximating the feel of Macero's edits onstage.

It seems obvious that Miles's studio albums between 1969 and 1972 were experiments. Some tracks were much more heavily edited than others, as the assembled musicians found their way into this new soundworld. The studio recordings on *Live-Evil*, for example, were released without too much post-production fiddling. On the other hand, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* was almost as heavily edited as the first disc of *Bitches Brew*. And *On the Corner* fell somewhere in the middle: The opening piece was heavily rejiggered, as were "Black Satin" and "One and One," but the long track that closed the album was pretty much a live-in-the-studio jam, with some additional percussion and post-production effects, but few edits.

At the same time, Miles was recording live albums, some of which were nearly as chopped-up as the studio records. *Miles Davis at Fillmore* was recorded over the course of four days in June 1970. Davis and Macero decided to devote one side of the double album to each of the four nights. In so doing, the producer made the choice to take highlights from the night's sets, rather than whole tunes. So while some pieces were allowed to run nearly their full course, and one or two came close to the ten-minute mark, others were chopped down to ninety-second introductory phrases or vamps. No effort was made to make the transitions smooth, subtle, or even particularly pleasing to the ear. Some switch with simple tape-slice.

The live tracks on *Live-Evil* were also resequenced after the fact. Listening to discs five and six of the Cellar Door boxed set allows us to locate a saxophone solo here, a drum break there, which were later recombined into the lengthy medleys that made up most of the 1971 double album. Further, a melodic fragment from the studio recording "Honky Tonk" is incorporated into the opening medley, "Sivad," and *Live-Evil*'s final track, "Inamorata," is drowned out at the end by a wash of strings from some long-lost soundtrack album Teo pulled from the Columbia vaults and a poem by Conrad Roberts. Neither added element has much of a place in the piece. The effect is more disorienting than evocative.

But again, the aim seems to have been the subversion of reality. Macero's goal was to disturb the listener. "Inamorata" is nearly thirty minutes long. By the time the strings and poetry come in, the music has grown quite involving. Thus, when the piece is rudely disrupted, the effect is much more jarring because of the time investment the listener has already put into the piece. It's like having someone shake you awake in the middle of a seductive and fascinating dream.

The same is true, on a smaller scale, of the tracks on *At Fillmore*. Just as you're settling into the flow of the performance, it's disrupted, quite sud-

denly. Even if each piece were brilliant and enjoyable on its own merits (and not all of them are), the transitions still come as a series of shocks. Listening to the record is like walking down a hallway and having unseen hands yank the carpet from beneath your feet at random intervals. It doesn't even seem like enjoyment was the point—the disruption of that enjoyment was. *Miles Davis at Fillmore* was another of the trumpeter's openly hostile albums, one of a set that included *Black Beauty*, *Live-Evil*, and *On the Corner*, and to a lesser degree *In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall*.

The work Teo Macero did in the studio with Miles Davis was not mirrored in his work with other Columbia artists. He was a house producer for the label, working with artists from Dave Brubeck and Thelonious Monk to Tony Bennett. But none of those artists' albums sound like *Bitches Brew* or *On the Corner*. They're straightforward jazz (or jazz-pop) records.

This indicates that, while Miles granted Teo a shocking degree of autonomy in the editing room (Macero claims that the *In a Silent Way* session was one of the only times Davis worked alongside him on the post-production), the artistic impulses were decidedly the trumpeter's own. Davis gave the raw material to Macero and approved the final edits. But it was the creation of that raw material that was crucial.

In his autobiography, Miles wrote of the *Bitches Brew* sessions,

> *I had told Teo Macero, who was producing the record, to just let the tapes run and get everything we played, told him to get* everything *and not to be coming in interrupting, asking questions. "Just stay in the booth and worry about getting down the sound," is what I told him. And he did, didn't fuck with us once and got down everything, got it down real good . . . I would direct, like a conductor, once we started to play, and I would either write down some music for somebody or I would tell him to play different things I was hearing, as the music was growing, coming together. It was loose and tight at the same time. It was casual but alert, everybody was alert to different possibilities that were coming up in the music. While the music was developing I would hear something that I thought could be extended or cut back. So that recording was a development of the creative process, a living composition. It was like a fugue, or motif, that we all bounced off of.*

So we see that to Davis, the electric sessions were an extension of the improvisatory process that created *Kind of Blue*. On that record, though, he'd still been pursuing complete takes, in traditional jazz fashion. In the late 1960s, there was no attempt made to play a piece all the way through, for the simple reason that there was no piece until its components were assembled, after the fact, in the editing room.

Over time, the creative process, into which Miles and Teo had wandered more or less blind, evolved. They grew to understand the capabilities

of technology (Macero, in fact, ordered machines custom-built to create effects he heard in his head and wanted to apply to the music), and the abilities of the assembled musicians, and the way those two factors could work together. They also felt their feet more and more as the years progressed. The 1969 sessions are cruder and more tentative than recordings from only a few months later, and music produced in 1974, during some of Miles's last studio dates before vanishing, is even more complex, but also more subtle and refined. In order to gain a clearer understanding of the methodology at work, I'm going to analyze three tracks: "Shhh/Peaceful," from 1969; "Go Ahead John," from 1970; and "He Loved Him Madly," from 1974.

Each of these tracks is very different from the others, and each represents a stage in the development of the Davis/Macero sound (if there can be said to be such a thing). The first one is relatively simple: The post-production on it is minimal. The second is much more elaborate, a collage of five separate "takes," some playing simultaneously in opposite channels of the stereo field. And the third, while seeming much less intricately constructed than the second, is in fact a work of profound beauty, with the post-production effects (and there are many) floating just beneath the surface, never calling attention to themselves as they do on the earlier tracks. By 1974, the illusions have become nearly seamless.

"Shhh/Peaceful" is a slow, simmering album side. The heart of the piece is Miles's trumpet, of course, but the body that surrounds that beating heart is the bank of three keyboards, played by Joe Zawinul, Chick Corea, and Larry Young. They shimmer and ripple, each of the trio listening carefully to what the other two are playing while making his own contribution. The effect is like floating in the ocean and being buffeted gently by currents from three directions at once.

Dave Holland's bassline is more assertive than the keyboardists' melodies, but not by much. He's basically playing a two-note theme, with a few little fillips and variations. And what's a bassline without a complementary drum rhythm? This is why Tony Williams's contribution, or lack thereof, is so important. His insistent hi-hat is crucial to the success of the piece and the album as a whole. Its steadiness gives everyone else something they can count on, something to build on. But it wasn't Tony Williams who decided to keep his playing that simple; it was Teo Macero.

Disc Two of *The Complete In a Silent Way Sessions* contains a different version, a rough draft if you will, of "Shhh/Peaceful." It's just over a minute longer than the album version, but it contains approximately seven minutes of music that didn't make it onto *In a Silent Way*. And it's very, very different from the final, released track.

The piece wasn't recorded all at once; the band played for a few minutes at a time, either repeating a vamp or searching for evocative sounds and

interactions through jamming. When they were done, though, they had about twenty minutes of usable music. Macero took those chunks of sound and put them into a rough order, assembling a somewhat coherent piece.

It's interesting to note how active the ensemble sounds on this early version of "Shhh/Peaceful." Williams is playing a lot more than anyone familiar with the released take might have expected, as are the other members of the band. The ambient noodlings that made the final album are there, of course, but there's also a much stronger, more traditionally melodic riff, which is repeated a few times. John McLaughlin plays his guitar more assertively, still working off one chord but adding a strong bluesy flavor. At one point or another, everyone in the ensemble, Miles included, is playing something a lot more like jazz than *In a Silent Way* wound up sounding.

To create the released version of "Shhh/Peaceful," Macero first had to pare away almost all of what was there. The powerful drum breaks vanished, as did the melodic hook. He took the hi-hat Williams had been playing underneath the jammier parts of the recording session and made that the primary rhythm. Macero then decided to use Miles's trumpet solo to create structure. It first appears about ninety seconds into the track, then recurs just past the thirteen-minute mark—not two versions of a solo, but the exact same hunk of tape. When the album was reviewed by *The New York Times*, critic Martin Williams wrote, "I decline to comment on Columbia's release, *In a Silent Way*, except for the warning that, through no fault of the musicians involved, the editing, annotating, and packaging are horrendous. Through faulty tape splicing, a portion of the music inadvertently gets repeated at one point!" Hey, at least he noticed.

This same sort of bracketing was done with the guitar chord that opens the piece; it crops up again about twelve minutes in, as though indicating that a second movement has begun. Before that, around the eleven-minute mark, the second-most-obvious edit in the piece (the first being, of course, the repeated trumpet solo) pops out at the listener. It's an off-beat tape slice, apparently intended to create the illusion of a polymetric measure since it chops off a fragment of a measure. It's not totally successful in that attempt; rather, it jars the listener out of the quite enjoyable trance that's been created thus far. Still, the music recovers quickly, and the mood is restored. The track winds down seven or so minutes later, with the repetition of a keyboard cascade from about five minutes into the piece. Once again, bracketing is used to imply structure and provide closure.

"Go Ahead John," recorded just about one year later, is a totally different animal. Simultaneously bluesier and rockier than *In a Silent Way*, it wasn't released until 1974's *Big Fun*, which is too bad; it might have made a better Side Two of *A Tribute To Jack Johnson* than the patchy and somewhat ill-conceived "Yesternow."

Indeed, "Go Ahead John," far from being "a psychedelic-era period piece" as Paul Tingen describes it in his book *Miles Beyond*, is one of the best things Miles and Macero created during the 1970s. It's a singular achievement in production, one that presents Miles in a different light than anything else in his catalog.

"Go Ahead John" was recorded on March 7, 1970, with a quintet consisting of Miles, Steve Grossman on soprano saxophone, John McLaughlin on guitar, Dave Holland on bass, and Jack DeJohnette on drums. This was one of the few times Miles recorded without a keyboard of any kind; after this session, he wouldn't do it again until 1981, with the stripped-down, street-funk band from *We Want Miles*. This sort of bare-bones lineup was an ideal working situation for Miles; particularly in the mid-1980s, he allowed keyboards to fill too much of his groups' sound. During both periods when he played without keyboards, in 1970 and 1981, his music gained a raw emotional power it would have been nice to hear sustained.

"Go Ahead John," especially when split into its component takes on the *Jack Johnson* box, has that emotional power and then some. Where *In a Silent Way* could drift into the background, "Go Ahead John" demands to be heard. It was recorded in five sections, ranging from three to thirteen minutes, which Macero then assembled, possibly as much as four years later. The degree to which Miles was involved with the post-production is a total mystery. Given the speed with which he moved from one thing to another, and the difference between the music he was making in 1974 and what he'd been doing in 1970, one could imagine his input boiling down to "Yeah, whatever." After all, as he told interviewer Sy Johnson about *Big Fun* near the time of its release, "I'll be tired of *this* music before today is over," meaning the results of that day's recording. "*That's* four years old."

The first ten minutes or so of "Go Ahead John" are fairly straightforward. McLaughlin plays staccato blues-funk guitar, and Holland's bass throbs below; he's playing one note over and over again. Jack DeJohnette thwacks out a funky, complex groove, which will become increasingly important later on. Steve Grossman solos first. He's as restrained as his bandmates, playing short ribbons of notes rather than the torrents he unleashed on some live recordings.

Miles enters at about the four-minute mark, playing open horn and heading for the sky. His tone is rich and full, his note choices as dead-on and fierce as on "Right Off" or anything else from this era. Once again, the blues brings out the best in him. He plays for nearly five minutes straight.

After Miles's first solo, the band vamps for a minute or so, then something happens that's 100 percent Macero. Thus far, the drums have been rattling back and forth between the left and right speakers. Teo had a machine specially constructed for this effect, an "automatic switcher." This

doesn't create the effect of two drummers. It's just disorienting, throwing the ear off balance in a way that forces the listener to pay close attention. The drums cease to perform their traditional function. Jack DeJohnette's beats, funky and propulsive on the session tapes, are so chopped up that their timekeeping utility is virtually nil. Macero has diced the rhythm so adroitly that we are not even permitted to hear an entire drum hit or hi-hat crash. All that remains are clicks and whooshes, barely identifiable as drums and, again, practically useless as rhythmic indicators. Thus, the pace is maintained by Dave Holland's one-note throb and the occasional descending blues progression he plays. The feeling one gets from "Go Ahead John" becomes one of floating in space. There's a blues feel, but it's not the amped-up Chicago blues soaking through the raw takes. It's more drifting and desolate, akin to the melancholy of John Lee Hooker's early-sixties electric work.

At the ten-minute mark, post-production becomes an even greater factor in the sound of the piece. Macero begins, at this point, to play two sections of the piece simultaneously. One of them contains John McLaughlin's guitar solo, which has become the single thing for which "Go Ahead John" is best known (and probably what it's titled for). From a technical standpoint, what he's playing isn't all that amazing. It's a collection of blues riffs one could probably find on a ZZ Top or Ted Nugent album, not at all the lightning-speed fretwork he'd focus on with Mahavishnu Orchestra. But the distortion is *nasty*, in the best possible way.

Even unadorned, as on the boxed set, McLaughlin's guitar solo is greasy and raunchy and suffused with the blues. But Macero puts it through the same switching device he's using on the drums, and the effect is astonishing. The guitar begins to stutter, fading sharply in and out on the beat. The best sonic comparison is made in the liner notes to the CD reissue of *Big Fun*, where it's described as sounding like a hornet trapped under a water glass. Lift the glass, and the buzz fills the air. Put the glass back down, and the volume is halved, instantly.

But starting at this point, and continuing for the remaining eighteen minutes of the track, Macero is not only switching the drums between the left and right channels, he's also playing two takes at once. Thus, McLaughlin plays rhythm guitar for his own grinding, roaring solo. And starting at about the fifteen-minute mark, we hear two Miles Davises, too.

This second half of "Go Ahead John" is even more interesting than the first fifteen minutes, because of this doubling effect. Miles's two solos fit together perfectly, creating a feel similar to that of New Orleans jazz, with two trumpets weaving intricate, complementary lines around each other.

After nearly a half hour, the track finally winds down. Since the virtual absence of drums keeps the track from building serious propulsion, it's an

easy transition in and out. But what's really important about "Go Ahead John" is that once again, we hear Davis and Macero subverting the idea of "now," and of a studio record being any kind of accurate rendition of events. Between the electronic switching effect applied to the drums and the doubling of both Miles's trumpet and McLaughlin's guitar, everything about the piece is in some way illusory. The master takes were not even incorporated into the final track in the order they were initially recorded! Macero clearly seems to be the prime mover in the assembly of "Go Ahead John," and he proves himself an exceedingly unreliable narrator.

The final track I wish to discuss was both recorded and edited in 1974. "He Loved Him Madly" is a thirty-two-minute eulogy for Duke Ellington that opens Miles's final studio release of the 1970s, *Get Up With It*. The piece is the longest and the most minimal of the three I've chosen to analyze; art-rock producer Brian Eno has even cited it as a primary influence on the development of ambient music.

"He Loved Him Madly" is a quantum leap beyond the technological achievements of "Shhh/Peaceful" and even "Go Ahead John." By 1974, Miles had developed his funk-rock sound to its furthest extreme onstage, but when making albums he continued to experiment with instrumentation and sound, changing his approach session-by-session. Macero, for his part, had become a total master of studio technology, able to achieve virtually any effect he wanted. The two tracks already discussed found the pair creating illusions, warping the reality of the session tapes to create a version that could never have really happened. With "He Loved Him Madly," they took the final step and mapped an entire world.

The track is constructed out of multiple short takes, in the same way as "Go Ahead John" and "Shhh/Peaceful," but the aim is entirely different. Rather than draw the listener's attention to the artificiality of production, every edit on "He Loved Him Madly" is camouflaged, made as imperceptible as possible. All the starts and stops of the raw recording are combined, with exquisite care, into a thirty-two-minute fugue.

"He Loved Him Madly" isn't just the most minimalist piece under discussion, it's the most minimalist piece in all of Miles's discography. It's almost possible to imagine the wind making these sounds, blowing across the instruments. At the same time, it's one of the most beautiful things he ever recorded, on a level with his acoustic-era treatment of standards like "Stella by Starlight" and "My Funny Valentine." The whole thing is impeccably mixed and produced. Every instrument, down to individual drums and cymbals, gets its own space in the stereo field. As the track comes slowly to life, with organ, guitar, and ultra-delicate cymbal washes, it feels like the slow descent of darkness. No single instrument dominates the piece. The closest candidate is probably Dominique Gaumont's guitar, but everyone is

whispering, contributing to a collective sound that's more like a group of machines humming, unattended, than a band working to produce music.

Mtume's congas receive the same speaker-switching effect heard on "Go Ahead John," but this time the aim—and the result—isn't disorientation. They slip past, behind the listener's head, like a tiny animal scurrying through a dark room. Al Foster's drums spread across the stereo field, each drum isolated from the others so that when Foster hits a tom, say, followed by the snare, the first hit comes from the extreme left, and the second from the extreme right, so it's like sitting between the drums, particularly when listening on headphones, which is recommended. Michael Henderson's bass is practically subsonic, booming like volcanic eruptions far beneath the sea. With the echo and reverb saturating Davis's trumpet and Sonny Fortune's flute, and the guitars of Dominique Gaumont and Reggie Lucas, "He Loved Him Madly" sounds like a voyage by submarine, a slowly unfolding panorama of dripping, underwater sounds and scattered but cohesive rattles and cymbal crashes.

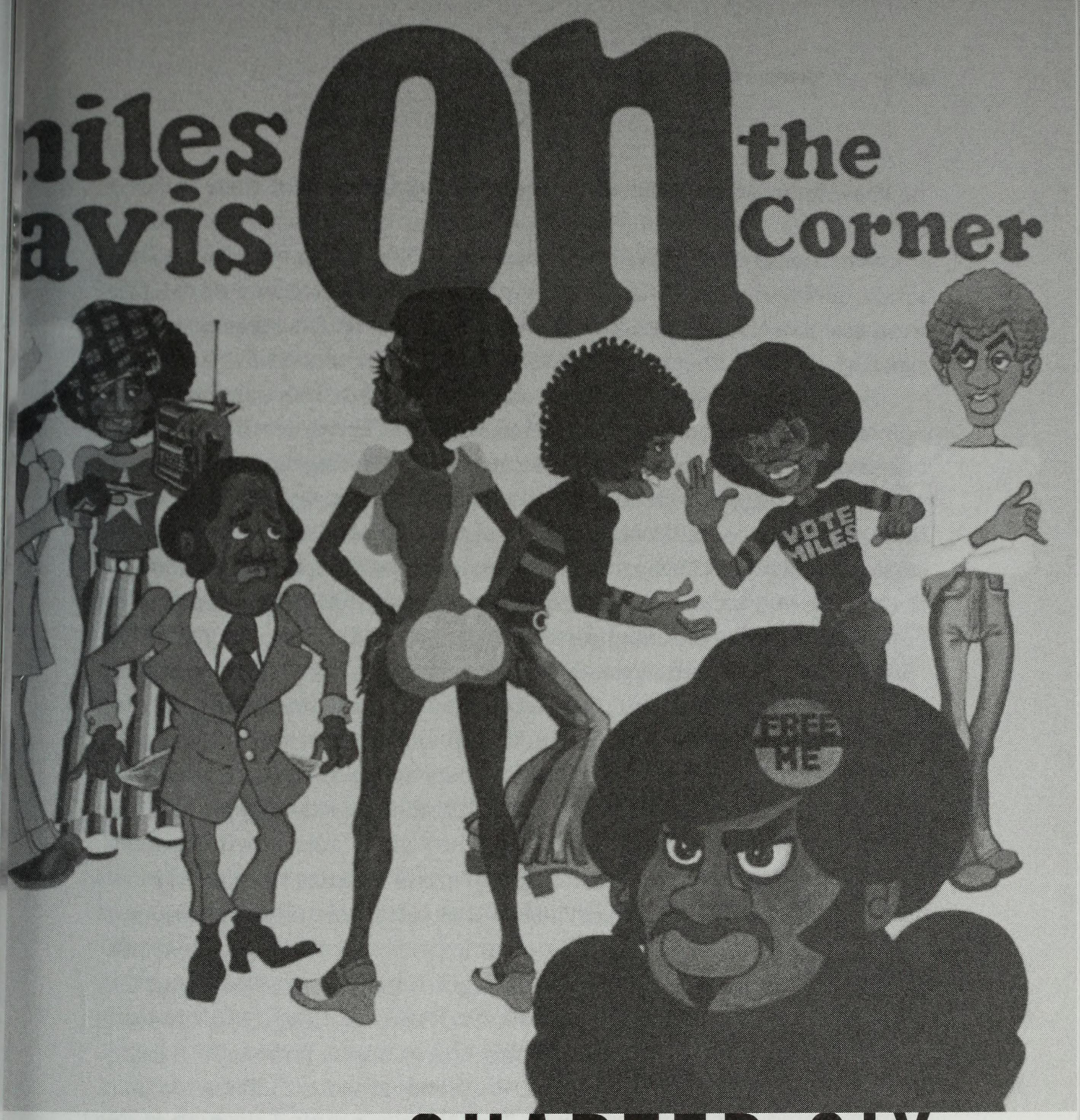
Gaumont is definitely the MVP of the session. He's barely represented in the Davis discography, appearing only on this track and the second half of *Dark Magus*. On that album, he unsurprisingly had his ass handed to him by Pete Cosey. But Cosey is the only member of the band who doesn't play on "He Loved Him Madly." He arrived late for the session and decided to sit it out rather than take up studio time tuning up and assembling his battery of gadgets. This was fortuitous, not only because Cosey's barbed-wire snarls of noise wouldn't have had any place in what Miles and Teo were creating, but because it allowed Gaumont to step to the fore. His mournful, spacey soloing has no parallel in jazz that I've heard. Its closest echo is Eddie Hazel's "Maggot Brain," from the 1970 Funkadelic album of the same name.

Teo Macero's tactic of repeating solos for effect is employed a few times during "He Loved Him Madly." The first two-and-a-half minutes of the track, featuring Gaumont's first solo, is repeated immediately after it occurs. The same thing is done to a Dave Liebman solo at about twenty minutes into the piece; he plays for roughly two minutes, but Macero runs it twice in a row. In contrast to *In a Silent Way*, the intent is clearly not to create a structure where there was none. "He Loved Him Madly" is almost defiantly unstructured. A cynical listener could infer that this is done purely to pad the running time, but the result argues otherwise. The repetition of the solos, in the end, creates a sort of suspension of time's natural flow. It makes the band seem to be spinning their wheels, and adds suspense to the piece, the same way looped passages in a techno record create tension before a drum break comes in, providing the catharsis that impels the dance floor. "He Loved Him Madly" is utterly undanceable, but the same principle of tension and release applies.

"He Loved Him Madly" was one of Miles's final studio recordings of the 1970s. After *Get Up With It*, he wouldn't release an album of new studio material until 1981, and that record, *The Man with the Horn*, would be produced under completely different conditions than the 1970s material. In a lot of ways, "He Loved Him Madly" was the result of Miles and Teo reaching the end of a creative pathway. The jamming-and-splicing approach they'd employed for five years might not have exhausted itself, but it might have ceased to interest them.

In fact, studio work had seemingly ceased to hold much appeal for Miles after 1970. He didn't record at all in the latter half of that year, or 1971. With the completion of *On the Corner*, in 1972, he virtually disappeared from the studio, preferring to take bands on the road. There were no studio dates in 1973 and only a few in 1974. Some of the material on *Get Up With It* was recorded in 1972, and some even earlier. One track, "Red China Blues," was Miles blowing over a track originally taped for some other purpose, possibly for someone else's album. Clearly, the concert stage was where he wanted to be: He released four double live albums (*In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall*, *Dark Magus*, *Agharta*, and *Pangaea*), and only one album of new studio material, in the interval between the late 1972 release of *On the Corner* and his 1975 sabbatical.

But when "Shhh/Peaceful," "Go Ahead John," and "He Loved Him Madly" are played sequentially, it's hard to see where Davis and Macero might have gone. The evolution they went through in just five years is astonishing and unequaled in jazz. To this day, the methods Miles and Teo employed are both influential and intimidating. Even during the initial fusion era, so much of which was played by ex-sidemen of Davis's, jamming-and-splicing was never a popular method of making records. Instead, groups like Weather Report, Mahavishnu Orchestra, and Return to Forever attempted to work like prog-rockers, rehearsing and laying down multi-tracked takes of whole tunes, fully composed with plenty of room for solos. And certainly, in today's far more conservative jazz world, there's no pairing of artist and producer like the team of Miles Davis and Teo Macero.



CHAPTER SIX
ON THE CORNER

DAVE LIEBMAN WAS AT HIS DOCTOR'S office on June 1, 1972, when he got a phone call. He'd been summoned to Columbia Studios on 52nd Street for a Miles Davis session. The trumpeter's regular saxophonist, Steve Grossman, was unavailable, and though Liebman had never worked with Miles before,

he knew he was being offered a major opportunity. He got there as fast as he could.

When he arrived at the studio, around 12:30, Liebman could see Davis inside, giving directions to a large group of musicians. Some of the faces were familiar—Herbie Hancock, Jack DeJohnette. Others were new. Miles signaled, through the glass, for Liebman to join the session.

He indicated that Liebman should take out his horn and play, and pointed him in the direction of a microphone. There weren't any headphones available, though, and it seemed like all the other instruments were electric, and plugged directly into the soundboard instead of into amplifiers. All Liebman could hear was a lot of tapping—the drummers and percussionists, and the keyboardists' fingers clacking. It was like standing in the middle of a secretarial pool. But, like it seemed Miles wanted, he just put the horn to his mouth and played.

The solo Dave Liebman recorded that afternoon is the first one heard on *On the Corner*, about a minute into the twenty-minute opening medley, "On the Corner/New York Girl/Thinkin' of One Thing and Doin' Another/Vote for Miles." What he plays is as far "out" as anything emanating from the Downtown loft scene of the time. It's all squawks and burbles, like someone singing in a foreign language through a radio down the block. And yet, it meshes, somehow, with the percussive clatter and jagged bursts of electric guitar and battling keyboards that surround it. It becomes one of the elements that make *On the Corner* so instantly identifiable. The combination of avant-garde saxophone, choppy funk groove, and repetitive, lurching drums is like nothing else in the Davis discography . . . nothing else released in jazz in 1972 . . . nothing else in music, period.

On the Corner is Miles Davis's most difficult album. It's like a tangle of thorns, coated in chrome and with 10,000 volts running through it. No matter how you approach it, you're going to get a shock.

In 1981, rock critic Lester Bangs reconsidered *On the Corner* in an essay called "Miles Davis: Music for the Living Dead." Like many, if not most, other critics, he'd hated the album upon its initial release, but nine years later he felt that changes in himself and in society—along with, one must assume, repeated listening—had brought the album into clearer relief. He wrote,

> *For the first time a Miles Davis album was conceived not as a setting for the type of deeply emotive trumpet playing on LPs like* Sketches of Spain *and* My Funny Valentine, *but as a world and a world-view fully realized in which all parts were equivalently integral to the whole. It was like a big painting of a whole city laid out as if on a map come wrigglingly alive. It was like a hive. Those who still don't "get it" might be best advised to put it on cassette and listen to it while walking around downtown Detroit,*

New York's 14th Street, or any really busy, crowded urban area. (Though interestingly enough I first really heard it when I was in Jamaica, where it was suddenly almost obscenely, frighteningly alive, and its sense of menace unmistakable.) As an old girlfriend said once when we drove through ghetto Detroit with it on the box, "I get it; this is an environment record." But that environment doesn't have to be funky; what was initially perceived as emotionless in the music turned out actually to be an alienation so extreme that we could only grow into it and the album as time caught up with us and we caught up with Miles. In fact, the music seems to change with and comment on different environments: in more low-rent areas, on the (real) corner, it not only catches the rhythms of human movement, but each instrument, and each little melodic or rhythmic figure (what once seemed like doodles, squiggles) that appears briefly, disappears, and reappears again several minutes later, is like a different one of the characters you see regularly passing through your local interzone, blending at first but eventually becoming the cast of an urban drama without beginning or end in which they are all hanging out. Play it in Macy's or midtown Manhattan or at the shopping mall and it grows discernibly colder, the wriggling entities more sinister.

Bangs used the music as the springboard for a discussion of a more general, culture-wide emotional alienation, the perception and analysis of which seemed to be his primary interest through much of the 1970s and the early 1980s, more than the records he was ostensibly critiquing. In this case, though, he may have been close to the mark. *On the Corner* is an astonishingly alienating album at first listen. It can sit for months like a malignant monolith, a taunting presence, challenging the purchaser to have one more go. But when it does give up its secrets (and it does so, albeit grudgingly indeed), the beauty at its heart makes most other music seem like a weak half-measure.

It's hard for me not to get hyperbolic about the importance of *On the Corner* in the development of Miles's music, and music as a whole, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. Sure, it's a dead end, artistically. Davis never attempted a record of *On the Corner*'s complexity again. His sound became more guitar-heavy, and rhythmically simpler, in the three years that followed. The studio recordings on *Get Up With It*, while still employing overdubs and careful, dramatic post-production editing, were for the most part more organic-sounding than *On the Corner*'s electronic sound-storm.

But on the other hand, the album was so forward-looking that it's not really surprising that its impact took years to register and is in fact still being felt. Many of its rhythms sound more like the disco-punk of the late

1970s and early 1980s (the music of bands like Konk, Material, and the Contortions) than like anything else in fusion. Further, its overdubbing, thick and repetitive basslines, and looped percussion link it to hip-hop and dub reggae. Far from ceding any ground to pop trends, *On the Corner* directly challenged funk, rock, and jazz players alike: Everyone working at the time had to deal with what they were hearing. Plus, it's a personal favorite. I've been listening to it for about fifteen years now, and I hear something new every single time.

For years, who played on the album, and what they played, were mysteries. The first pressing of the record was notably missing a list of personnel, in defiance of jazz orthodoxy. Davis claimed the omission was an attempt to get critics to hear the music simply as sound and not waste their time trying to pick specific players out of the dense, cluttered mix. Even if they understood his logic, though, his bandmembers wanted credit for their contributions. Liebman offered the magazine *Down Beat* a list of personnel based on his own memories of the session, and a second edition of the record contained that roster, but it wasn't totally accurate. The 2000 CD reissue was the first edition of the album to contain anything like a definitive list of personnel, and it's still rumored to be incomplete, despite being quite long.

The ensemble numbers over a dozen and varies from track to track. The players, according to various reports, are Davis, saxophonists Liebman and Carlos Garnett, bass clarinet player Bennie Maupin, keyboardists Herbie Hancock, Harold "Ivory" Williams, Lonnie Liston Smith, and Chick Corea, guitarists John McLaughlin and David Creamer, tabla player Badal Roy, percussionists Don Alias and Mtume, electric sitarists Colin Walcott and Khalil Balakrishna, electric cellist Paul Buckmaster, bassist Michael Henderson, and drummers Jack DeJohnette, Billy Hart, and Al Foster. The extensive electronic manipulation of the sound makes it difficult to discern everyone's contributions, though, and there may be additional musicians whose work remains lost to history.

The album's opening track, "On the Corner/New York Girl/Thinkin' of One Thing and Doin' Another/Vote for Miles" disorients the listener immediately. The music starts midway through a measure, off-rhythm, forcing the ear out of step. Thirty seconds of rhythm-section vamping follows. Horns and electric pianos, sounding like the sirens of ambulances caught in a traffic jam, blat away behind the guitars. Liebman's soprano saxophone emerges from this morass. When he finishes, guitarist John McLaughlin steps to the fore, playing a knotty, disgruntled solo that's noisier and less overtly blues-derived than anything from the 1970 sessions.

(The difference between McLaughlin's work with Davis and his other, contemporaneous projects is striking. Compare his *On the Corner* solos with

those on *Love, Devotion, Surrender,* a collaboration recorded with Carlos Santana in late 1972. The former is all snarl and grit, working territory somewhere between Sonny Sharrock and Ronnie Montrose. The latter is a white-robed dream, offering spiritual purification through amplification and virtuosity.)

A few minutes later, Davis makes his entrance, spitting short, contorted riffs through a wah-wah pedal as the ensemble comps behind him. And buried in the chaos, hiding behind the three-note bassline and the guitar solos like phoneline static, spacey synths and organs and electric pianos hum and shimmer and feed back. It all combines to create a kind of cognitive dissonance—the sound of noon bustle fighting with 4 A.M. calm. This bifurcation is a constant condition. It's almost easy, at various points, to focus on the keyboards (and, to a lesser degree, the electric sitars) and drift away into a zone of near-placidity, before being jerked back to awareness by the relentless, rattling drums and percussion.

On the second cut, "Black Satin," a hypnotic trumpet melody slithers over Michael Henderson's chunky, distorted bassline and an ocean of chaotic, swirling rhythms and electronic pulses. The basic track (and the rest of the album) was primarily recorded on June 6, but on July 7 an additional layer of bells, handclaps, and African percussion, plus a second trumpet track, was overdubbed onto the existing piece. Teo Macero diced everything into a constantly shifting sonic whirlpool that, although propelled by Henderson's thumb-popped, repetitive bassline, isn't conventionally funky in any way. It seems impossible to dance to this music. There's just too much going on for a listener to surrender to the groove. Once the melody's heard, though, it lingers for days. "Black Satin" was released, with a slightly different mix, as a single called "The Molester." I've never heard that version, but it's easy to imagine the song being popular on the dance floor, if just a bit of the album cut's polyrhythmic complexity was pared away and the tune's trancelike qualities were permitted to come to the fore.

"One and One" is even more disorienting and listener-unfriendly than "Black Satin." It's something like a remix of its predecessor, building on similar foundations but achieving totally different results. Davis barely appears on the track. The space is filled, instead, with a saxophone solo from Carlos Garnett, even more complex percussive interplay (including speaker-switching effects), and layer upon layer of electronic keyboards. An under-recognized element of *On the Corner* comes into play here: the influence of Indian music. The drones and trance effects created by Badal Roy's tablas and Khalil Balakrishna and Colin Walcott's electric sitars, give the album a spacious quality that keeps it from being utterly oppressive. Miles was experimenting with Indian instruments in late 1969, after the *Bitches Brew* recording sessions and before the turn toward heavier blues-rock that

spawned *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*—but afterward, they'd vanish from his ensembles until *On the Corner*.

Badal Roy and Khalil Balakrishna weren't part of Miles's circle. They were playing in an Indian restaurant next door to the studios, when John McLaughlin, a regular patron, brought them in for the *On the Corner* sessions. Davis immediately latched onto Roy in particular, calling upon him to set up a tabla rhythm around which the drummers could work. He and Colin Walcott even became part of the live band in 1972. They were gone by 1973, though, as Miles began to go in a more straight-ahead funk-rock direction, with much more emphasis on guitars in place of electronic keyboards.

On the Corner concludes with the twenty-three-minute "Helen Butte/ Mr. Freedom X," which, while it starts out feeling slightly more organic than the rest of the record, quickly becomes one of its most complex constructions. It's based on the same lengthy band performance that Macero used to create "Black Satin" and "One and One," but as it plays out, the degree of post-production tweaking and overdubbing increases steadily. In the beginning, there's a repeat of the trumpet melody that anchors "Black Satin." Toward the end there's a quiet interlude that showcases Badal Roy and Mtume, followed by Macero's insertion of a mesmerizing hi-hat pattern that's been heard throughout the record, albeit much louder than any previous occurrence. There's also a short but shocking passage in which a few notes of electric sitar are looped in a way that sounds like a keyboard riff from a techno record, twenty-plus years before the fact. Still, the long stretches of live-in-the-studio jamming demonstrate that this ensemble was capable of substantially more than they were credited with at the time.

On the Corner is filled with some of the same deliberate, technology-fueled distortions of auditory reality discussed in the previous chapter. But the aim is entirely different from that of *In a Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew*, or even *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*. Davis and Macero are not attempting to create the illusion of an organic track, as they would on "He Loved Him Madly" two years later. Neither is it their goal, particularly, to draw attention to the artificiality of their methodology, as on "Go Ahead John" or *In a Silent Way*. There is no postmodern wink here. Instead, they seem intent on immersing the listener in a totally absorbing world of sound.

On the Corner was recorded on 16-track studio equipment and, as mentioned above, many of the instruments were plugged directly into the soundboard. (It was still possible for most of the musicians to hear what was being played, through headphones; there just weren't enough pairs to give one to Liebman.) Connecting everything directly into the studio in this way would have given Teo Macero "pure" tracks to manipulate as he saw fit, after the fact. He could bring up a keyboard, a saxophone, or a guitar in the mix, or switch them from one side of the stereo field to the other, at

will. Throughout the album, instruments enter, leave, and re-enter the music suddenly and without warning—on the beat, of course, but the effect is still disorienting and unsettling. In keeping with the album's title, it's exactly like being hailed unexpectedly by a stranger on the street, when one's attention is elsewhere.

The album's mix defies tradition—in fact, it's almost willfully oppositional. The lead voices, particularly Davis's trumpet, are mixed relatively low. They're always audible, and they do emerge from the forest of keyboards and percussion, but not in the commanding manner common to jazz or even rock records. Miles and Macero subverted the traditional paradigm of a loud lead voice, supported by a subdued backing band, by making the rhythm instruments the dominant sounds, particularly percussion and handclaps. Some listeners probably find this infuriating, but when approached with open ears, it creates a fascinating opportunity for exploration.

The two drummers (on the opening cut, Jack DeJohnette and Billy Hart; on the rest of the album, DeJohnette and Al Foster) are positioned in the far left and far right of the stereo field, playing complementary patterns that almost, but don't quite, match up. Badal Roy's tablas, and the congas and small hand drums of Don Alias and Mtume, are much louder than the actual drum kits, and they don't have the same airy feel as the drums. They seem to have been much more closely miked, for less reverb and more assertiveness. When *On the Corner* is heard through speakers, it's like listening from Mtume's or Alias' vantage. The congas and percussion are quite often the loudest things, with the rest of the band filling in around them.

Miles's trumpet is fed through the wah-wah pedal for virtually the entire record. Teo Macero has stated that in a few places, the wah-wah sound was added in post-production. Davis's phrases are choppy and seem almost to mimic McLaughlin's distorted, growling guitar lines. At times (on "Black Satin" in particular), the trumpeter is playing so softly that the hypnotic melody line seems whistled, rather than blown through even a muted horn. This, combined with that song's very prominent handclaps, makes it sound like a man walking down the street, through traffic and afternoon bustle, clapping and whistling a tune to himself.

On the Corner is the first Davis album on which Michael Henderson is the only bass player. While he was already a full-time bandmember by the *Jack Johnson* sessions, some of the sections of "Yesternow," from that record, featured Dave Holland's playing. Still, *On the Corner* isn't a Henderson coming-out party by any means. His basslines are thumbpopped and distorted, and locked in with the drums. A few years down the line, Henderson would assume a much more dominant role, making the bass a lead instrument, as in funk. This was possible because of the relative spaciousness of the 1973–75 band, and the one-chord vamps upon which the music of

those years was built. Here, he never leaps to the fore, because of the density and complexity of the instrumentation that surrounds him. His *On the Corner* basslines are five- or six-note phrases so repetitive they might as well be loops. In some cases, they probably are.

Henderson's background in funk doesn't really help him on this record, surprising as it may seem. Funk rhythms develop organically, and *On the Corner*'s patterns never do that. The drummers latch onto a small patch of ground, holding it for the entire length of a given track, and Henderson falls into line with them. Changes in the rhythm are created by Macero's insertion of additional percussion and handclaps into the mix. But since those elements were not present during the actual recording, Henderson is unable to react to them. It's a somewhat ironic, almost perverse problem. A few jazz critics accused Henderson of playing the same notes over and over again throughout his time with Miles. But what he was doing was usually much more subtle than that. The variations on apparently simple phrases that he offered were like the tides: They seemed regular but were in fact changing on a micro scale, very slightly different every time. For *On the Corner*, though, he really *was* limited, and at times you can hear him champing at the bit, wanting to inject a little extra funky strut into things but being held in place by the metronomic drum pattern(s).

Those drum tracks have a looped feel all their own. The patterns played throughout the record are intensely repetitive, even mechanistic. They nod in the direction of funk but are so staccato and choppy that it's impossible for a groove to rise out of what they're playing. For groove to emerge, there must be pauses that function as rests but imply momentum. The rhythms on *On the Corner* don't have rests, they have dead stops. Repeated interruptions. The effect is jarring. These rhythms never seduce the listener into filling the gaps mentally, the way the beats on James Brown or Sly Stone's records would do. This in spite of the fact, stated earlier, that the opening medley's rhythm derives directly from the one that underpins Sly Stone's "In Time," from *Fresh*.

In this way, *On the Corner*'s rhythms anticipate some of the more avant-garde hip-hop, and also drum 'n' bass, a music that inspires dancing not because of its funkiness, but because it's so fast it jolts the central nervous system into a kind of spastic response. The body attempts to follow, indeed feels compelled to try, but over the long haul (an entire evening spent in a club, say) it's impossible to maintain the pace indicated by drum 'n' bass rhythm. Similarly, it's impossible to dance to *On the Corner*. The herky-jerky beat, which seems at first to invite hip shaking, eventually proves disorienting and unpleasant. It's a record that beckons with one hand and shoves the listener away with the other.

That same alienation is a crucial component of the record's visual presentation. *On the Corner* looked like no Miles Davis album before it. Other, earlier records—most notably *Bitches Brew* and *Live-Evil*—had sported artwork, instead of photographs, on their covers. But those albums aimed for a spiritually informed beauty. They were loaded with cosmically symbolic imagery and visions of a kind of pan-African benevolence (except for *Live-Evil*'s back cover, of course, which caricatured J. Edgar Hoover as a bewigged, malign monster toad).

On the Corner, by contrast, came sheathed in a bright yellow cover splattered with caricatured ghetto dwellers: hookers (or women who dressed like them), pimps (or men who dressed like them), and two young hepcats in black sweaters, with red and green stripes (a nod to the black power movement) and the slogan "Vote Miles." (These same two appear again on the back cover of *Big Fun*.) In the lower right-hand corner of the front cover, a man in a beret and black coat glowers forth, not quite looking the viewer in the eye. His hat sports a button that reads, "Free Me." (Is this a message directly from Miles? What does he seek to be free of—jazz, perhaps?) The whole picture looks like something straight out of the pages of the underground comix of the time—a cross between *Superfly* and R. Crumb's black cartoon characters. It's an extremely shocking album cover, even today. In 1972, coming from one of the biggest performers in jazz, it must have been horrifying.

Corky McCoy painted the cover. He'd contribute artwork to three other Davis records in the next four years—*Big Fun*, *In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall*, and the compilation *Water Babies*. In all but the latter case, McCoy's work is an ideal visual translation of the music on offer. The cover to *In Concert* is much like that of *On the Corner*, depicting a similar pantheon of street folks, but this time there are white hippies alongside the black hipsters, and they all seem gathered in one place for one purpose; they're clearly intended to represent the audience for the September 29, 1972 concert documented on the double album. *Big Fun*'s gatefold cover, on the other hand, is much more placid and less overtly "street," though it's painted in a similar style. On the front, a nude black woman with close-cropped hair stands before the bell of a gigantic, green trumpet. On the back, a few of McCoy's characters approach the mouthpiece; one, a middle-aged fellow in a dark suit, puffs his cheeks and blows into it. The background is a deep blue—very soothing, compared with the shocking yellow of *On the Corner* and the purple of *In Concert*. In this way, it too is suited to the music; each of *Big Fun*'s four tracks is a methodical working-out of a few ideas over a leisurely groove. (Even "Go Ahead John" takes its time getting where it wants to go.)

An album called *On the Corner* couldn't have had any other cover. It functions as an ideal visual translation of the step down from the cosmic pretensions of previous releases, just as the stark black-and-white photo of Miles leaning back and playing the trumpet, from the cover of *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, indicated that album's organic, jamming feel. The almost graffiti-like caricatures, and the absence of personnel, create the impression Miles wanted. He was climbing down from the ivory tower of jazz and walking out—onto the corner.

At the same time, though, the cover is misleading to anyone coming from a Stevie Wonder/Parliament-Funkadelic headspace, because, as described above, there isn't much here for those who want to dance. *On the Corner* could easily have been given a title Ornette Coleman used, a few years later: *Dancing in Your Head*. It gives the illusion, at first, of being ass-shaking funk but soon enough reveals itself (to anyone who sticks with it beyond the alienating, almost hostile opening medley) as a head album, an art-funk-jazz-rock electronic masterpiece that requires headphones, concentration, and repeated plays even to become intelligible, let alone enjoyable. It demands that the listener *work*. Indeed, though it's commonly interpreted as an attempt at a funk record, that's a simplistic analysis. Lester Bangs's description of it as "a big painting of a whole city laid out as if on a map come wrigglingly alive" is much more accurate, because (possibly unconsciously) it takes into account all the different musics which went into Miles's creative stew-pot.

Miles didn't want Badal Roy or Khalil Balakrishna to attempt to play funk on Indian instruments; he wanted to layer Indian music into his funk. In the same way, John McLaughlin's guitar sound comes out of jazz and blues-rock but owes almost nothing to funk players like, say, Phelps "Catfish" Collins (James Brown's lead guitarist in 1969 and 1970) or Funkadelic's Eddie Hazel. Don Alias and Mtume play congas and percussion, incorporating African and Latin rhythms and sounds without surrendering to less subtle American grooves. (Echoes of what they contributed can be heard on early-eighties albums by Nigerian juju musician King Sunny Ade.) The keyboardists play melodies somewhat related to soul and funk, or perhaps soul jazz. But they also play tight clusters of notes that, plucked out of the mix and heard in isolation, suggest the minimalist music of Philip Glass or Steve Reich as much as any jazz performer.

All these elements come together in *On the Corner*'s swirling, smeared sound. Sometimes they congeal beautifully, as on the opening medley. Other times, on "One and One" in particular, they battle each other for space. The various sounds, coming from various parts of the world, act much like the population of New York did, in the early 1970s: harmonious coexistence most of the time, friction and combat on occasion.

Why was this album made, though? Why that sound, and why then? In Miles's autobiography, he states,

> *It was with* On the Corner *and* Big Fun *that I really made an effort to get my music over to young black people. They are the ones who buy records and come to concerts, and I had started thinking about building a new audience for the future. I already had gotten a lot of young white people coming to my concerts after* Bitches Brew *and so I thought it would be good if I could get all these young people together listening to my music and digging the groove.*

The phrasing is crucial. Miles isn't talking about changing his music to suit a youthful audience, he's talking about attracting young people to the music he's going to be playing anyway. Sure, he incorporated funk into his music. He liked funk. That was (and still is) viewed in some quarters as a sin, but it wasn't one. With that in mind, it's entirely possible, even likely, that Miles's attempt to sell *On the Corner* and *Big Fun* to black kids *wasn't* a craven sellout that went wrong. It was actually a prescient understanding of young blacks' (and young whites', for that matter) ability to absorb even the most alienating avant-garde gestures, when properly marketed.

As has already been discussed, jazz became increasingly abstract in the years after bebop. It became an intellectual music and while some listeners walked away, others embraced it even more tightly for exactly that reason. Preserving its position required a vigorous and vigilant defense against heresy, of course. Attempts to move outside the rarefied and segregated territory marked "jazz" in the eyes and ears of (mostly white) critics were decried as crass vulgarizations of the music, and as attempts to pander to rhythm-crazed youth. (It must be noted that some black writers, most notably Stanley Crouch and Albert Murray, also took this reactionary position, and defend it quite militantly to this day.)

It's my belief that even the most avant-garde jazz can reach a wide audience, if it's presented as just one more entertainment option, standing or falling on its aesthetic merits. Jazz's troubles arise from an all-too-frequent insistence on marketing itself as a sophisticated pleasure for elevated palates. In the early to mid-1960s, the "soul jazz" movement was quite popular with black audiences: Organists like Jimmy Smith and Big John Patton, and guitarists like Grant Green and George Benson, played inner-city clubs and did quite well. But the free players emerged not out of Newark or Harlem, but Greenwich Village, and their shows were packed with earnest white college students. Only in the late 1960s and even the early 1970s did black audiences pick up on this music, attending shows by Pharaoh Sanders at all-black community centers like Brooklyn's the East. But groups like the Art Ensemble of Chicago, who stressed their links to the

entire history of black music, were forced to live in Europe from 1969 to 1972 in order to make a living as performers, because they had no one to promote their music to urban, black American listeners.

Ironically, the rise of hip-hop has proved the theory that young blacks, like young whites, will open their ears to anything, if given the chance. DJs' omnivorous employment of a staggering variety of melodies and sounds from all across the musical spectrum as fodder for new tracks has demonstrated that nothing is rejected out of hand. Left-wing rock critics tend to see this wholesale appropriation of sound as both a universal good and a political gesture, striking blows against an oppressive white culture and "rockist" media by recontextualizing its messages, or something like that. But this de-emphasizes (removes from the debate, really) the idea that black kids might be listening to Aerosmith, Black Sabbath, Van Halen, or AC/DC (to name only four of the numerous hard rock bands whose riffs have been incorporated into rap songs) because they *like the music*. Miles's belief that, with proper marketing, *On the Corner* could reach an appreciative audience of black teens thus seems far from delusional.

Of course, any attempt to lure new listeners to jazz brought the accusations of "selling out" that dogged Davis from the late 1960s to the end of his career. Even Lester Bangs slipped into this mindset, though he didn't succumb as irrevocably as others. As he wrote in his essay "Kind of Grim: Unraveling the Miles Perplex,"

> *Even though he still doesn't move as many units as the prodigal Stanley Clarke or blear-orbs McLaughlin, it's safe to assume that in 1976 at least a couple of double-disc meistersplats of murk-mung elektro-Miles are as essential a component of the cokespoon swinger's pad as the proper brand of aromatic candles. So Miles is not just background music but an essential part of the conspicuous consumption mores of a certain current subculture, and perhaps should not be criticized as music at all, but rather in accordance with [his] rise and fall on the barometer of college-student and pimp-chic Hip. So maybe Tom Wolfe should start reviewing his records instead of me.*

This allegation isn't totally bogus, but it is somewhat reductive. It's hard to imagine any of Miles's 1970s recordings, even "He Loved Him Madly," as background music. But even if *Big Fun* or *Get Up With It* was some hypothetical/archetypal swinger's lifestyle soundtrack, does that take anything away from the genuine emotional and aesthetic power of the records? I don't think it does. One of the great things about these records, *On the Corner* in particular, is that their very existence proves that context means nothing where recorded music is concerned.

Creating a context for music is always an external process. There is no internal context for music, despite the superficialities of instrumentation, rhythm, or melody that may seem to ground a style in a particular geography, whether it's Jewish klezmer, Nigerian juju, or Delta blues. To insist on a dominant context is to attempt to establish a degree of control over music's innate nature that can only be destructive to creativity. Without taking anything away from the honest, deeply felt desire to innovate within an evolving tradition, the minute a musician decides there's a note he "can't" play within a given tune (for reasons other than its not being found within the chord changes or the melodic range), he's handcuffing himself.

Miles understood this. The shattering of context was one of his primary creative strategies in the electric years. Whether he was juxtaposing seemingly incompatible instruments, or using up-to-the-minute production techniques to yank a solo from its original position and move it somewhere else entirely, or repeat a musical passage over and over again, he (along with Teo Macero) was always trying to keep listeners off-balance, that they might hear more clearly what he was actually playing. It's easy to fill in the gaps in a predictable music mentally, and listen passively. But Miles understood that when you didn't know what was coming next, you'd have to listen to find out—and then you might actually hear something, instead of just coasting on memory and presumption.

It's also important to consider that music is something we carry with us. It's a tool we use to help construct a larger context for ourselves. But until a listener incorporates it into a larger or more personal reality, music is as inert as krypton gas. And even when we're actively engaging with a record, it doesn't alter our situation. Listening to Ennio Morricone soundtracks doesn't make you a gunslinger, nor does listening to Schoolly D make you a gangster. But it can make you feel that way for a few minutes.

Listening to *On the Corner*, particularly on headphones, also seems to transform the world around you. The effect is wholly transitory and nontransferable, though. It stops the minute the music does, and the person next to you remains unchanged.

It's unclear whether this was something Miles was really trying to achieve with the album. Perhaps he was, though, and perhaps he felt unsuccessful in that attempt. Maybe that's why the music he made after the album's release seems like a retreat. Not in terms of fire and fury (*Agharta* and *Pangaea* are albums that would make most rock guitarists quail), but in terms of technological complexity. Post-*On the Corner*, Davis began to focus on live performance as his primary communicative platform. Other than a few tracks that found their ways to *Big Fun* and *Get Up With It*, everything he released for the rest of the 1970s was recorded live.

One of the few studio tracks Miles recorded in 1972 was "Ife," a twenty-two-minute trance groove that formed Side Two of *Big Fun*. A lot of the *On the Corner* company are present at this June 12 session, six days after the recording of that album. "Ife" begins with a distorted organ figure from either Lonnie Liston Smith or Harold "Ivory" Williams. Sonny Fortune, who'd join the band full-time in 1974, is there, along with Carlos Garnett; Miles's electric-era love of the soprano saxophone has led him to bring in two players. Al Foster and Billy Hart play around each other, creating a walloping, complex pile-up of drums. Mtume and Badal Roy are hard to hear for the first few minutes—little tremors of percussion at the far edges of the soundfield, not much more. During some of the quieter passages, though, they become more assertive, bolstering the electric pianos.

As with a lot of mid-1970s Miles, the soloists permit themselves to wander. The horns combine the funky feel of *On the Corner* with some of the abstraction of *Bitches Brew* and *In a Silent Way*. Bennie Maupin's clarinet is the bridge between those two styles. Hearing him interject quick squirts of notes is an unexpected pleasure. Garnett and Fortune contribute little by comparison. Miles is still blowing through the wah-wah, his trumpet almost melting into the electric piano sounds at times.

The bassline is a dubwise throb. Henderson plays five notes over and over again, with very little variation. More than anything from *On the Corner* this performance indicates the role Henderson would come to play in Miles's band.

"Ife" moves so slowly that it's reminiscent of the late work of Morton Feldman. Small melodic cells repeat again and again, like they're never going to change, until they do, with almost imperceptible subtlety. He keeps the music moving, as Foster and Hart play an almost New Orleans shuffle-funk rhythm, but the bassline eventually proves so static that the energy begins to drift away. In general, though "Ife" has interesting moments, it's not a particularly compelling track. Like three of the four side-long jams on *Big Fun* ("Go Ahead John" is the exception), it goes nowhere, at length. It could definitely have benefited from a little more *On the Corner*-style chopping-up by Teo Macero.

"Red China Blues," by contrast, is underrated. Miles recorded over an existing group performance, one that doesn't even feature his regular cast of players. Henderson, Foster and Mtume are present, but so are drummer Bernard "Pretty" Purdie, guitarist Cornell Dupree, and harmonica player Wally Chambers, who leads the ensemble before Davis steps in. The trumpet solo is pure Chicago blues, but it's fed through the wah-wah pedal to mesmerizing, gutsy effect.

The backing band isn't doing anything particularly adventurous, simply working over the same patch of ground for the length of the piece. Henderson

pumps enough soul and funk into the groove, though, that the track comes across not as rote blues cliché, but as pure jazz-rock, on the level of Frank Zappa's *Hot Rats* and beyond the efforts of bands like Blood, Sweat & Tears. Indeed, had it been issued as a single in 1972, "Red China Blues" probably could have done fairly well. The punchy horn section behind Miles would certainly have sounded fine to the ears of early-seventies funk/soul fans.

"Rated X" couldn't be more different from "Ife" or "Red China Blues." It's astonishingly assaultive, filling any space in which it's played, whether it's a tiny bedroom or a whole stretch of NYC sidewalk. It just takes over.

The band is a stripped-down version of the *On the Corner* ensemble, the same lineup that appears on *In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall*. Only saxophone and trumpet are missing. (Miles only plays organ on the track.)

Everything begins with a four-note organ riff, then a blast like Miles is laying his whole forearm across the keyboard. Then Al Foster starts playing. The drumbeat is huge and echoey, like something from a Led Zeppelin album or DJ Shadow's *Endtroducing*. . . . Mtume and Badal Roy fill in added percussion, playing in unison, and Michael Henderson begins to roar underneath, like an earthquake in a cave. It's impossible to hear Khalil Balakrishna's electric sitar, though the album credits insist he's there. Reggie Lucas, the only guitarist, is chopping out one-chord funk.

The big news is Miles, though, even without his horn. The band laid down the rhythm track, and Miles's dissonant organ parts were dubbed in after the fact by Macero. As the rhythm rattles relentlessly forward, like a car speeding on octagonal wheels, he repeatedly drops the band out of the mix, on the beat, leaving silence. That *Phantom of the Opera* organ just floats in the air then, screaming in the listener's ear for some of the longest seconds I've ever experienced.

If Miles had played a wah-wah trumpet solo on "Rated X," the funky band rhythm would have resulted in one of his most upbeat, and probably most enjoyable, tracks of the period. But the combination of Macero's disruptions and Davis's screeching organ makes it the most hostile piece of music he released in the 1970s, even harsher and more unremitting than *On the Corner*. Still, that one track aside, *Get Up With It* is mostly filled with his most accessible 1970s material. Pieces like "Maiysha" and "Red China Blues" are palatable to almost any ear, and "He Loved Him Madly" is the most heartbreakingly beautiful track of Miles's entire electric era. Perhaps he just wanted to prove that he was still a badass to be feared, "He Loved Him Madly" be damned.

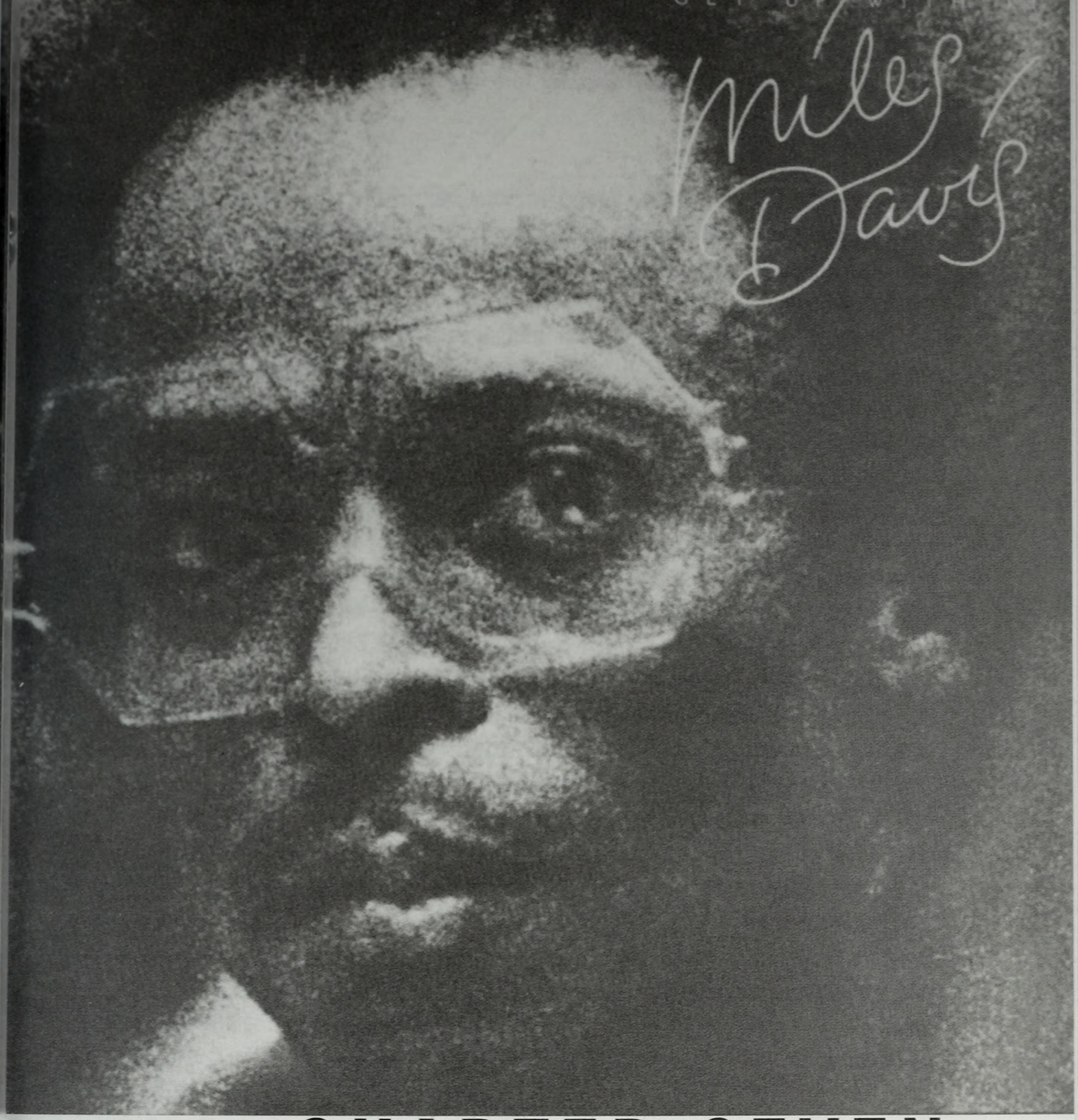
Why were these three tracks (and "Billy Preston," which also appeared on *Get Up With It*) the only things Miles recorded during 1972, aside from *On the Corner*? When compared with the massive amount of material recorded in the sixteen sessions from 1970, it seems pretty paltry.

The answer is obvious. The experimental phase Miles began in 1968, with the recording of *Miles in the Sky* and *Filles de Kilimanjaro,* had concluded at the end of 1970, with *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* and the studio portions of *Live-Evil*. The changes he made in his music during those three years were linear. Electric instruments gradually became a larger and larger portion of the arrangements, and shifts in recording procedures followed concurrently. But this process had a natural end-point, and reached it.

On the Corner came after this process, and was totally separate from it. First of all, the album contained no elements of the blues and very little rock. Its jagged funk, Afro-Indian rhythms, and electronic noise formed a cocktail that was unique and unrepeatable. Furthermore, it's clear that Miles entered the studio with a particular vision. It's less clear whether the finished album fully reflected what he'd originally imagined. There are strong indications, from sidemen and collaborators, that a fair amount of it was created on the fly. In any case, *On the Corner* was not cobbled together, like every other Davis record from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. He called the sessions with the specific goal of making one complete album.

The other 1972 studio tracks were laid down for the more pragmatic goal of having something around, in case it became necessary to release another studio record. Because it's abundantly clear, observing Miles's behavior in the years that followed, that by 1970 he'd already decided to trade the studio for the stage, creatively speaking.

Not only did Davis spend the years from 1972 to 1975 on a series of tours, but upon his return in the 1980s he took to the road with a shocking energy. For the rest of his career, studio albums became repositories for new compositions, often contributed by bandmembers, which were then transformed, night by night, in performance. In fact, once he signed to Warner Bros. in 1986, Miles simply stopped recording his own pieces. And interestingly, the only album he ever made that was comparable to *On the Corner* was *Tutu*. It didn't sound like the 1972 record, but it was just as much a pure product of the recording studio, and it was very nearly as controversial as its predecessor.



CHAPTER SEVEN

MICHAEL HENDERSON

THE APRIL 7, 1970 RECORDING SESSION that produced about 65 percent of *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* marked a sea change in Miles's music. The last time he'd laid anything to tape, eighteen days earlier, the band had been Steve Grossman on soprano sax, John McLaughlin on guitar, Dave Holland on bass, and Lenny

White on drums. While White's contributions to *Bitches Brew* are noteworthy (he plays on every track but "Miles Runs the Voodoo Down"), the one track produced on March 20, "Sugar Ray," was not. It stayed in the vault until 2003.

On April 7, Billy Cobham was in the drum chair. Herbie Hancock was back, playing organ. And in place of Dave Holland was nineteen-year-old Michael Henderson, late of Motown—like his predecessor, recruited (rather infamously) right off the bandstand.

Dave Holland had been playing behind a vocalist named Elaine Delmar when Miles spotted him, in London. A few weeks later, the Englishman had gotten The Call, and arrived in New York for the second *Filles de Kilimanjaro* date, in September 1968. He stayed in the band for nearly two years, appearing on *In a Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew*, three (official) live albums, and portions of *Jack Johnson*.

Holland was looking to leave the band by spring 1970, though, as was Chick Corea. The music the quintet was making had become increasingly bifurcated, especially onstage. When Miles was soloing, they followed him in fairly straight-ahead fashion, albeit plugged in and loud. But when he finished playing and abandoned the bandstand, as was his wont, they took off into nearly pure abstraction. Only rarely were they able to tempt the boss into joining them in space. More often, he'd sit by the bar, listening and marveling just like any other audience member. Eventually, he'd retake the stage and whisper to Jack DeJohnette to bring it back in, and the band would finish the tune in a way that would be recognizable to the audience. After all, the group was still performing old chestnuts like "I Fall In Love Too Easily" between newer pieces like "Directions" and "Sanctuary."

Holland finally felt compelled to approach Miles and announce his resignation. The music might have been getting wilder live, but in the studio it was becoming more and more stripped-down and focused on groove. Holland wanted to indulge himself fully in the freedom he felt when Davis was offstage. Even though the trumpeter seemed shocked, and insisted the bassist was free to play anything he wanted within the band, both men likely realized Holland wasn't going to be able to restrain himself in a way that would satisfy either of them, and he left.

In his next band, Holland got his freedom—for a little while, anyway. Circle was a quartet featuring Corea, avant-garde saxophonist Anthony Braxton, and drummer Barry Altschul. The group was well received, but lasted only a year, disbanding in 1972. Corea went on to form Return to Forever, a Latin-infused fusion outfit. In 1974, Holland reunited with DeJohnette, creating trancelike but still "out" grooves behind Carlos Santana and Alice Coltrane on their collaborative album *Illuminations*.

Miles was already moving toward funky blues-rock by the time Holland quit. Tracks like "Willie Nelson" and "Duran" were built around simple, repetitive riffs, with electric bass and guitar dominating the sound. On "Duran" in particular, the groove is paramount, with Holland playing one variation after another on the core line, creating something like improvised R&B. The liner notes to the *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* boxed set, and Miles's own words, describe this music as rock, but it's not, really. It's much closer to the stinging electric blues of Albert King than the post-Hendrix, Fourth World funk-metal Davis would pursue between 1973 and 1975. In any case, it was clear that finding a much more groove-focused bassist was vital to the new music's development.

Miles spotted Michael Henderson onstage at New York's Copacabana club. The tall, skinny teenager was part of Stevie Wonder's road band. When the performance ended, Davis went backstage. Leaning over to a seated Wonder, he rasped in the bandleader's ear, "I'm stealing your bass player."

It was a few weeks before Henderson actually flew to New York from Detroit, and when he did, it was only for the April 7 session. Three days later, when Davis recorded *Black Beauty* at the Fillmore East, Dave Holland was still in the band. That was it for him, though. By the next recording session, on May 19, Holland was out, and Henderson was in. He'd remain until 1975, and probably would have stayed longer, had Miles not gone into self-imposed exile.

Within funk/R&B circles, the job Henderson left, with Stevie Wonder, was at least as prestigious as the one he took with Miles Davis. Shockingly, neither represented the bassist's professional debut. By the time he joined Wonder's group, Henderson had been playing, live and on record, for nearly five years.

Born in Yazoo City, Mississippi, he grew up in Detroit. Even as a small child, he'd been musically inclined. His mother would take him to parties where he'd earn pocket change singing and dancing, imitating Elvis Presley or Nat Cole. He'd resume his singing career in the late 1970s, but from an early age Henderson was an instrumentalist, starting out on guitar. He struggled with the cello for a little while in junior high, but never harbored serious dreams of being a classical musician. Finally, his mother bought him a Crestwood bass from a pawnshop, and he began taking lessons at Grinnell's music store in downtown Detroit. By the time he was an adolescent, Henderson's mother had no doubt her son was going to be a professional musician.

His first group, formed with a drummer friend named A.J. Sparks, was called the Hut Men. They worked out of the Big Star recording studio in Detroit. A lot of Motown players would come through and moonlight at Big

Star. This was in 1963 and 1964—Henderson was only thirteen years old. He and Sparks soon began working with the Magictones, who had a regional hit record with "Together, We Shall Overcome," as well as with the Fantastic Four, whose biggest hit was "The Whole World Is a Stage." Henderson got his first taste of the road with the Four, traveling all over the country. The main group he was working with at that time, though, was the Detroit Emeralds, whose song "Showtime" was later re-recorded by Sly Stone's former bassist, Larry Graham.

James Jamerson, Earl Van Dyke, and other Motown Records sidemen used to sit in at a local club, the Chit Chat Lounge. They played the tight, funky-yet-melodic R&B that became the Motown sound, live, every night, over the radio. At home, the teenaged Henderson would record them off the radio on a 7″ reel-to-reel tape deck. He listened to his tapes, slowed Motown records down on his mother's turntable to learn all the parts, and eventually parlayed his mastery of the material (and, more importantly, the sound) into his gig with the Detroit Emeralds. Working with them took him into the Motor City nightclubs, where he met all the players who'd inspired him, including Jamerson, the jazz-trained genius responsible, if any one man is, for the Motown Sound.

After touring for a while on the network of black clubs, bars, and theaters known as the "chitlin circuit," having paid his dues playing with most of the major local groups, Henderson found himself backstage at the Regal Theater after one night's show. Stevie Wonder was sitting at a piano, playing. So Henderson, the cocky kid spotting an opportunity, got his bass and ran over. Wonder was from Detroit, he was from Detroit, so what the hell, right? Henderson started by playing with the head of the bass against the piano, so it could be heard. Even putting the head of a bass against a wall will create enough vibration to make the music audible. But after a moment, he grabbed a small amp, and then he and Stevie were jamming, playing songs they both knew. Henderson played a couple of Wonder's tunes, and before long, the keyboardist was asking Gene Key, his musical director, to get a phone number. The next thing he knew, Wonder called him up and offered him a job.

Henderson toured extensively with Wonder. He did the *Ed Sullivan Show* behind the singer, playing "I Was Made to Love Her" and "Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours)." The band was backed by an orchestra, so there was no room for flubbed notes. And live, the music differed from the recorded versions. Wonder inserted lots of little build-ups, changes in the middle, and modulations, to keep everything exciting. Being able to hold up under those circumstances did a lot to build the teenaged Henderson's reputation as a player. Soon, work with Wonder, the Four Tops, Martha

Reeves and the Vandellas, and the Originals became plentiful. He divided his time between the Motown groups, as well as Aretha Franklin. He worked with whoever was on the road, even playing with Hamilton Bohannon, the Motown bandleader at that time, and his orchestra. In 1970, his touring schedule brought him to New York, and that was how nineteen-year-old Michael Henderson, already a seasoned professional, met Miles Davis.

Henderson's style of funky R&B was almost exactly the opposite of what Holland had been playing. The younger man's basslines were punchy, fixated on the low end to an almost dubwise degree and, more than anything, repetitive. Henderson played five- or six-note patterns, looping for ten or twenty minutes at a stretch. *On the Corner*, for example, featured only two basslines. One anchored the nearly twenty-minute opening medley, and the other supported every track from "Black Satin" through the closing "Helen Butte/Mr. Freedom X"— nearly thirty-five minutes of music.

This was exactly why Miles hired the kid. Davis had it in his mind to change his music in the most radical way yet, and Henderson was the ideal man—possibly the *only* man—for the newly redefined job.

The December 1970 live recordings that made up the bulk of *Live-Evil*, and which were released in expanded form on the six-CD boxed set *The Cellar Door Sessions 1970*, were a sort of coming-out party for Henderson and for Miles's aggressively funky new style. Tunes like "What I Say" and "Inamorata" are much different from the complex material that had appeared on albums like *At Fillmore* and *Black Beauty*, recorded only months earlier. The foundation of each piece was a simple vamp, bluesy and groove-based, that allowed for extensive soloing . . . by everyone *except* the bassist and drummer. As mentioned in Chapter Five, Davis specifically instructed Henderson not to follow Keith Jarrett, for example, when the keyboardist went out. He was to stay tight, holding down the groove.

The transformation of the group sound from the rock-steady grooves of 1970 to the swirling, overamped world-music acid-funk of 1975 was slow, though, with nearly as many stages as the earlier evolution from *Miles in the Sky* to *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, even if the changes were more incremental, taking the form of variations on a theme rather than wholesale, album-by-album revamping. As late as 1971, pieces from the 1969 band's book, like "Directions" and "Sanctuary," were still being performed live. They were substantially altered, though, by the nature of the almost entirely new band. Keith Jarrett had become the sole keyboardist, and Gary Bartz had replaced Steve Grossman on saxophone. A more aggressive player than his immediate predecessor, he preferred the slightly thicker alto to the often-shrill soprano. Percussionist Airto Moreira had left by 1971 too, replaced by Mtume and, briefly, Jim Riley (a.k.a. Jumma Santos). When Jack DeJohnette

backed out of a month-long European tour, Miles hired Leon "Ndugu" Chancler, a funkier and more rock-oriented drummer who also played with Herbie Hancock's Mwandishi, in his stead.

In those years, Miles led by fostering conflict more than at any time before or after. He would tell one musician one thing, offer contradictory advice to another, and have none of them working together. But then he'd say to Henderson, "Michael, here we go!" and he'd play a part, one of the musical cue phrases he used to guide the group. Henderson would know what the appropriate bassline was. Wherever it went from there would be determined in the moment. But when Davis and Henderson announced the direction, the game was on, and everybody else had to get in formation.

Over time, Henderson's confidence grew until he was, in some ways, directing the band nearly as much as Davis, while still, on the face of things, holding himself in the background. It was relatively easy for him to assume the role he did, because of his funk and R&B background. The wanderings of a jazz player have no place in funk, even an improvisatory acid funk like Miles was creating. The bassist's job is to keep the band locked into the groove. The bottom must always remain, and it must always be rock-steady. The trick, therefore, is to do something innovative within that seemingly limited space.

Miles used Henderson's simple and steady basslines as a pivot, to turn the band in one direction or another. The melodic cues Davis employed to change musical modes are easily recognizable to anyone who listens to more than one live recording from between 1973 and 1975. The high-speed funk-rock vamp that opens *Agharta*, for example, also inaugurates *Pangaea* and *Dark Magus*, but it's always heard as a bridge to another piece. The shifts are frequently so quick that it's possible to assume that the changeover was indicated with a hand signal of some kind from Miles, but that's not the case. In fact, the cues were entirely musical; quick trumpet or keyboard phrases that functioned like turn signals for the ensemble.

According to Henderson, Miles would use the set basslines as a starting point and a common denominator. So the band would stay with that one thing, as demarcated by Henderson, but work around it, finding as many millions of different ways as they could to play it. The bassist never felt constrained by this arrangement. He had all the freedom he needed, but Miles usually wanted to maintain a single vamp for the duration of a piece. Once he started something, he didn't want to get up off it. There was room for a little bit of flux, perhaps, but according to Henderson, Davis would often say, "Don't start swingin'! If you swing, I'ma fire you!"

Eventually, of course, this would trigger an urge within the bassist to rebel, even if his insurgencies were small. He can be heard playing the bassline to "So What" at the end of *Agharta*'s first disc. He claims to have

pulled that trick on a few occasions, and he played "All Blues" too. Henderson says Miles looked at him when he played it, as if to say, "You motherfucker" (as he was often wont to do). Seeing that look, and not wishing to risk the leader's wrath, nobody else came in, so the idea died. But the audience cheered.

Perhaps the best way to understand how Miles was reshaping the band, and using Henderson's bass as the primary instrument of that change, is to look at the two pieces that remained in the live set from 1969 to 1971: "Directions" and "Sanctuary."

Live versions are available from each year. On *It's About That Time*, recorded in France in July 1969, the band (as discussed in Chapter 1) is Miles, Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea, Dave Holland, and Jack DeJohnette. On *Black Beauty*, from April 1970, Steve Grossman has replaced Shorter but the band is otherwise unchanged. Dave Holland has switched to electric bass, though. And on the unofficial albums *What I Say?* and *Another Bitches Brew*, recorded in November 1971 in Europe, the Gary Bartz/Keith Jarrett/Michael Henderson/Leon "Ndugu" Chancler/Mtume band is heard.

The original studio recording of "Directions," from November 1968, featured an expanded ensemble much like the one that recorded *In a Silent Way* three months later. Shorter, Holland, Corea, and DeJohnette were all present, supported by Herbie Hancock and the piece's composer, Joe Zawinul, both playing electric piano. Two versions of the song were recorded, but when heard back to back, they blend seamlessly.

"Directions" features one of Miles's most identifiable fanfares. (He started shows with it for three years.) Behind the bright, blaring horns, the bassline churns the air without really implying much forward motion. That's left to Jack DeJohnette, who pounds away more in the vein of an adventurous late-sixties rock player (think Ginger Baker with Cream, or Mitch Mitchell with the Jimi Hendrix Experience) than anybody else in jazz. The session was his studio debut with the band, and he introduced himself quite assertively.

"Sanctuary," on the other hand, is a melancholy, drifting piece. Initially an acoustic track save for guest guitarist George Benson, it was recorded, then shelved, in February 1968. Eighteen months later, in August 1969, it was re-recorded for *Bitches Brew*. In this radical reformulation, the piece was nearly eleven minutes long. The ensemble was again a large one, featuring Zawinul on electric piano, and percussion by Don Alias and Jumma Santos, in addition to the lineup of Davis, Shorter, Corea, Holland, and DeJohnette. (John McLaughlin is credited, but totally inaudible—to me, anyway.)

On *Bitches Brew*, "Sanctuary" takes Miles's usual, almost rhythm-free approach to balladry and moves it into the electric sound-world. The drums

and percussion instruments rattle and hiss around the edges of the music; the main crescendos come from Miles's own horn. Holland's bass playing is free, without resorting to atonality or trance effects. He's not doing much that Ron Carter wouldn't have, in his place.

About three minutes in, a groove *does* emerge, Chick Corea's keyboards locking in with the rhythm section. DeJohnette begins to work a delicate, swinging rock rhythm, not unlike things that could be heard on albums by Soft Machine or other British jazz-rock acts. But it doesn't last. After about ninety seconds, the wave crests and breaks, and we're back to floating in space, as Miles and Corea duet. Eventually, the ensemble rebuilds itself for one final ascent and ultimate crescendo, replete with cymbal crashes and electric piano burble.

The first version of "Sanctuary" I want to talk about actually predates the *Bitches Brew* version, having been recorded live in Juan-les-Pins, France, in June 1969. It's freer and more assertive than the *Bitches Brew* version, spurred forward by DeJohnette's cymbals from the very beginning. It's also not even half as long as the studio take. The *Bitches Brew* version was nearly eleven minutes long, but it would almost never be allowed to extend much past five minutes onstage.

Miles's horn is at full strength, and Corea dances around him, as does Holland. The drums are wild, almost like a rock solo, even as Davis continues to play with agonizing slowness. And just over four minutes in, it's over, as Miles squirts out the short fanfare melody, "The Theme," with which he'd been closing shows since the 1950s. There's no duet section between himself and Corea, and really no ensemble interplay at all. Miles seems in fact to be deliberately countering everything the rest of the quintet is doing—the more assertive they become, the more slowly he plays in response.

The version of "Directions" that opens the show, by contrast, finds Davis roaring and leaping right there with his young band. He and Shorter tear into the main melody, and Davis fires off a skyrocketing solo, playing near the top of his range and spitting out one comet-like crescendo after another. Corea, Holland, and DeJohnette are in full free-jazz assault mode behind him, crashing and clattering without respite. Throughout much of the rest of this show, they're comparatively restrained, but they come roaring out of the starting gate behind both Davis and Shorter, who solos immediately after the trumpeter. The whole piece is only six minutes long, but it packs as much energy as most other bands' full sets.

Less than a year later, in April 1970, Miles would re-record "Directions" for the double live album *Black Beauty*, and it was a whole different piece. Shorter's gone, replaced by Steve Grossman, and Airto Moreira is adding percussion and sound effects. Indeed, he's one of the most interesting things about the piece's first few minutes. Behind Corea's distorted

keyboards and DeJohnette's twitchy, hyperactive rock beat, Airto creates a weird squeak with some hand-held instrument or another, sounding like an animal hiding in a South American rain forest somewhere. The implication is immediate and inescapable: We're in the jungle.

Teo Macero, while keeping the performance live and raw, exercises some production judgment over it. Miles's horn switches from the left to the right speaker as one section of his opening solo gives way to another. He releases one long, spiraling phrase, then vanishes to the other side to cut loose with another. Steve Grossman's solos are subject to the same processing. It's mildly diverting on headphones; one imagines Davis and Grossman sprinting past each other onstage, as though the concert were some sort of athletic event. (Given the volume, speed, and ferocity of the music, that's not an entirely ridiculous notion.)

The version of "Sanctuary" on *Black Beauty* is, once again, a fairly stripped-down one, only lasting four minutes in the middle of a set that's practically one long song. The mood is set by ninety-five seconds of "I Fall in Love Too Easily," which is where the piece got its genesis, anyhow. During the acoustic quintet years, Davis and Herbie Hancock would perform "I Fall in Love Too Easily" as a duet. Miles wanted to continue this practice, only with Chick Corea's electric keyboard, and that idea became the centerpiece of the studio version of "Sanctuary." But by 1970, with the electricity fully powered up and the post-bop sound almost totally filtered out of the music, this sort of thing was rapidly becoming at odds with everything else the band was doing. It shows in the performance, too; while "I Fall in Love Too Easily" leads nicely into "Sanctuary," the two pieces don't really match the tone of the rest of *Black Beauty*, which is a roiling storm of a record, with Dave Holland's bass one of the most agitated, propulsive components.

Holland is no longer playing the discursive free lines he'd been exploring on the upright. Plugged in, he's doing a lot of the same things he can be heard doing on the *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* box—holding to one spot, exploring the various permutations and variations of a single, thick R&B riff. "Directions" provides him with a superb opportunity for this type of deep-inside playing, and he seizes upon it. For nearly eleven minutes, Holland is the pulsating center of the band. Chick Corea's keyboards are fuzzed-out and blaring; Airto Moreira's percussion and jungle hoots disorient and unsettle the listener. It's up to Holland to hold things together and to figure out, with Jack DeJohnette, where the hell the piece is going to go.

When Henderson arrived in late 1970, the idea that the bass was going to co-lead, along with the trumpet, had been explored somewhat, as *Black Beauty* indicates. But the younger man took the music much more aggressively into the realm of funk, where the bass really *is* the lead instrument,

and that caused an aesthetic upheaval. The versions of "Directions" being played on the 1971 fall tour of Europe are an ideal illustration of this change.

First of all, the piece is slower than before. No longer a post-bop windsprint with a high-pitched fanfare, it's now a thick marathon anchored by Henderson's bass vamps. He's already adopted the approach of taking one funky, evocative phrase and grinding it into the floor, and he's got an ideal foil in drummer Chancler, whose intuitive understanding of grooves and how to sustain them meshes perfectly with the bassist's muscular throb. The pair is flanked by Don Alias and Mtume, on congas and other percussion, giving an African feel to the funk. Keith Jarrett worries away at his keyboard, playing occasional scribbles of melody but just as often contributing only sound effects. Miles's trumpet is another sound effect, as he's plugged into the wah-wah pedal and is stomping on it like a roach. His solos are distorted ribbons of sound, streaming forth from the horn with no way to separate one note from the next. The electronics swallow the gaps, the spots where one might formerly have been able to hear the breathing, the humanity within the music.

But again, it's got to be emphasized that the most important component of this whole is the bass (and, secondarily, the drums). Davis has subordinated himself to the rhythm, soloing over it but never attempting to guide it as he did in earlier bands. His acoustic quintets always moved as one behind him. His first electric band played freer than any group before, but even then, as long as he was physically present on the stage, his leadership was unquestioned. When Henderson arrived, the infusion of energy he brought with him, and the role he took for himself in reshaping the music, literally from the bottom up, created a new power structure.

Hunter Thompson has written about the human urge to invent machines too powerful to be controlled by their creators. His examples are Formula 1 race cars and the .44 Magnum revolver. The Davis bands, particularly from 1973 to 1975, exemplify this principle too. Miles built himself a band that didn't need him to tell it where to go and what to do. He had only to listen to it play, and step out in front from time to time for a quick solo. The machine would run itself.

Live recordings of the 1970–71 James Brown band, which featured Bootsy Collins on bass and his brother "Catfish" on guitar, demonstrate the same principle of the bassist-as-fulcrum. Of course, the JBs were a much more tightly disciplined unit than any Miles Davis band; there was room for improvisation, but much more was required of the players, in terms of coming in together and hitting their marks. Brown sidemen from every band have been quoted saying something along the lines of "The first lesson of playing with James Brown is, *watch James Brown.*" The Godfather of Soul was legendary for fining players who missed notes or dropped beats.

As a result, the discipline and the relentless groove of his bands was equally legendary, and remains impressive to this day.

By far the best available example of the JBs at work is the album *Love Power Peace: Live at The Olympia, Paris, 1971*. The record opens with the songs "Brother Rapp" and "Ain't It Funky Now," blended into a seamless eight-minute marathon of machine-gun drumming (by two drummers) and one-two horn jabs. Brown's vocals, naturally, work as an additional layer of percussion. "Brother Rapp" builds quickly—more accurately, it doesn't build at all; it begins at fever pitch, the instant Brown reaches the microphone, and it never slows down. After five minutes of high-speed, stuttering funk, the song builds to its climax, a breathtakingly wild, pulse-pounding guitar solo from Catfish Collins. Then, out of nowhere, the change comes. Bootsy Collins switches, on a dime, from the pulsing, very fast but R&B-based groove of "Brother Rapp" to the much more staccato "Ain't It Funky Now," and it's one of those musical moments that stops the breath in your chest. The rest of the song, great as it is, is anticlimactic. It's that switch, like a high-performance racecar taking a hard left turn, that's not only the tightest, hardest band James Brown ever fielded, operating at its absolute peak—it's a prime example of, and a tribute to, the glory of collective music-making.

Bootsy was a big part of the show during these years. He was the first bassist ever to get a solo spot in a Brown performance. And though he and his brother, along with the horn players they'd brought with them from Cincinnati, were with Brown for less than eighteen months, they recorded some of the Godfather's most legendary, anthemic tracks, from "Get Up I Feel Like Being a Sex Machine" and "Super Bad" to "Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing" and the astonishing "Give It Up or Turnit A Loose." The relative youth of the band, and the energy they brought with them, rejuvenated Brown creatively after the setback of having his classic mid-sixties group quit on no notice.

The CD *Funk Power 1970: A Brand New Thang*, which collates almost all of Brown's recordings with the JBs, offers the hardest-driving music in his entire catalog. The rhythms are funky as hell, and utterly relentless; the grooves offer no respite. Lyrics are more chanted than sung, as always with Brown, and the horn riffs are punchy and assertive.

One of the most shocking things, though, is the tenor saxophone playing of Robert "Chopper" McCullough. This is what takes James Brown into the realm of the secretly avant-garde. McCullough's saxophone solos are nothing like those of Maceo Parker, the man he replaced. They're screaming tirades, nearly on the level of the harshest blowouts ever mustered by players like Pharaoh Sanders or Peter Brötzmann. In fact, on "Super Bad" Brown can be heard exhorting McCullough to greater heights, barking,

"Play me some Trane, Robert! Play me some Trane!" That it seems weird, somehow, to think of James Brown being aware of John Coltrane says a lot about how separate jazz has been kept, as history is written, from other music—particularly other black music.

Michael Henderson and Bootsy Collins are the same age—born in 1951—and both joined the bands that made their names at nineteen. Henderson stayed in one spot longer than Collins did, of course. He remained in Miles's employ from 1970 to 1975. In that same half-decade, Bootsy moved from James Brown's band to George Clinton's, and began a solo career to boot. Interestingly, by 1975 Henderson and Collins were playing more similar music, as sidemen, than they'd been doing in 1970. The hard funk of James Brown circa 1970 was much different from the amped-up boogie of *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* or the jagged, bluesy grooves of the Cellar Door performances. Funkadelic's lengthy acid jams of the mid-seventies approached, but didn't equal, the sprawling, pan-global funk-rock blowouts Miles was playing on records like *Dark Magus*, *Agharta*, and *Pangaea*.

Henderson was aware of Bootsy, of course. Who couldn't pay attention to James Brown, after all? The two bassists knew each other back then, and still do today. They did a fair amount of contemporaneous studio work at United Sound in Detroit. James Jamerson was a habitué of United, as were former Davis sidemen Ron Carter and Paul Chambers. Henderson has described the place as a bass player's world.

Collins played on Johnnie Taylor's "Disco Lady" at United; Henderson was the bassist on several other Taylor tunes. Bootsy recorded some songs with the vocal group the Dramatics, but Henderson was a major component of their studio sound, playing on records like "What You See Is What You Get," "In the Rain" and "Hey You, Get Off My Mountain." He also garnered some hit credits as a songwriter with the Dramatics, writing "Be My Girl" for them, as well as "Treat Me Like a Man" and "Just Shopping (Not Buying Anything)."

Hiring Michael Henderson was both musically and symbolically important. Though Miles was playing rock venues and incorporating rock rhythms for a year before Henderson joined the band, the bassist was the first explicitly non-jazz musician in the group. Henderson's arrival was a line in the sand, a clear signal that Miles was no longer loyal to jazz, that he'd decided (or realized) that the common definition of that term could no longer contain his ambitions. Of course this gave ammunition to those critics and fans that viewed his early-'seventies music as some kind of sell-out, a capitulation to commercial forces. But Miles was hardly the only one moving between two or more worlds.

Henderson's youth was also an issue. Since the 1950s, Miles had made a habit of hiring young players. Some were only a few years his junior, like John Coltrane; others were teenagers when they joined his band, like bassist

Paul Chambers and drummer Tony Williams. The thing was, Miles kept this practice up as he himself aged, so his bands became younger and younger relative to the boss. By the early 1970s, Miles was in his mid-forties. He could literally have been Michael Henderson's father. And regardless of the bassist's chronological age, the fact is that by playing funk, he was identified with youth culture in a way that Miles Davis and all his other sidemen, coming as they did from jazz circles, were not. Even when copies of *Bitches Brew* were flying off record store shelves, even when Charles Lloyd was being embraced by crowds of rapturous hippies at the Fillmore, jazz as a whole was not the dominant form of music for American youth, and no one was hubristic enough to claim otherwise.

Henderson proved that Davis was genuinely interested in bringing his music to new audiences—not only to younger listeners, but to all listeners outside of jazz. Hiring the bassist was a good-faith gesture, acknowledging in a way that no one had before that musicians from non-jazz backgrounds had something valid to contribute too. There was really no way it could be seen as anything but a positive development by listeners Henderson's age, particularly black ones, who might well know him from his work with Motown.

After leaving Davis's employ, Henderson resumed his R&B work and embarked on a solo career as a bassist, songwriter, and vocalist. He released eight albums in the late 1970s and early 1980s, scoring a few hits, including "Slingshot" (a sort of precursor to "The Thong Song") and "Wide Receiver," as well as "At the Concert," which featured Roberta Flack. He also teamed up with the drummer Norman Connors (formerly of Pharaoh Sanders's band, among others) for a few additional hit singles, including "Valentine Love." It's only in the last few years that he's returned to jazz, with the band Children on the Corner (composed almost entirely of electric-Miles alumni). In late November 2003, I attended the band's first New York show, celebrating the release of their debut CD, *Rebirth*.

The group is a sextet. On the disc, recorded live at Oakland jazz club Yoshi's in 2002, almost everyone is a former Miles sideman. Sonny Fortune plays alto and soprano saxophones, and flute; Barry Finnerty, who played on *The Man with the Horn*, is the guitarist; Henderson is the bassist, coleader, and anchor; Badal Roy plays tablas; Leon "Ndugu" Chancler is the drummer. The only non-alumnus among them is coleader and keyboardist Michael Wolff, formerly of the *Arsenio Hall Show* house band and a jazz musician with a few albums under his own banner.

The show I saw was at Joe's Pub. Chancler was absent, replaced by Victor Jones, another man who'd never played with Davis.

As on *Rebirth*, the band opened with "Directions," but it was unlike any version I'd heard on a Davis album. Since there was no trumpet to provide the high-pitched fanfare, Fortune played it on soprano saxophone, shadowed

by Wolff's keyboards. Finnerty was chopping out dense, rough chords, fully electrified and loud, and Jones was hammering the beat like John Bonham, all cymbal crashes and huge stomping foot. Badal Roy's tablas were audible, but only just. The heaviest instrument in the mix, though, was Henderson's bass. He's a tall man, and no longer the skinny kid he was in Miles's band. He stood behind Wolff's bank of keyboards like a grumpy but sedate bear. His hands moved back and forth across the instrument, clutching the neck and seeming to tear notes from it almost violently. He barely changed position or expression during the pieces, vanishing into the music.

Once the main riff of "Directions" had been played (and that only came after several minutes of abstract, noisy keyboard work), Fortune launched into a wild, unfettered solo. He sounded like he hadn't lost a drop of energy since *Agharta*. Finnerty was the next man to step into the spotlight (figuratively speaking; the stage was too small to allow much movement on anybody's part), and he demonstrated much more style and force than he got the chance to do on his one studio outing with Davis. He was playing in the spirit of Pete Cosey and Funkadelic's Eddie Hazel, rather than limiting himself to the glossy eighties hard rock sound he'd employed on *The Man with the Horn*. Henderson kept the bassline thick and funky. All in all, "Directions" took about twenty minutes to play out, and "out" was the operative word. By the end it was barely recognizable.

In case their name hadn't already given away the game, the second piece showed where the roots of the band lay. It was a reinterpretation of the opening medley from *On the Corner*. This is a dense, studio-centric music, and even Miles didn't really attempt to play it live, except for the version of "Black Satin" on *In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall*. But Henderson, Wolff, and company took the one-chord vamp that gave the medley what little structure it had, and ran with it. Victor Jones was relentless with the hypnotic hi-hat figure that rings in the listener's ear for what seems like days after playing the album, and his snare cracked like gunfire. Henderson worked the repetitive, five-note bass groove deep into the ground. Badal Roy moved to the fore on this piece much more than he had during "Directions," but his spotlight moment was yet to come.

Some of the pieces the sextet performed weren't part of Miles Davis's repertoire. One such outing, called "Tone Poem" on the *Rebirth* CD, was largely a showcase for keyboardist Wolff. When he's left to himself, his style is fairly lush and romantic, almost florid. That didn't show up so much within the band context, though; he stuck to the funk, following Henderson's lead a lot of the time. The pair shared quite a few glances throughout the set, keeping each other in the groove.

Badal Roy got a solo spot—several minutes of tablas and chanting that was interesting in its own way, but something of a distraction from the

mood of the set. Fortunately, the music got loud again as soon as he was finished.

The penultimate piece of the set started out being all about Henderson. The bassline he played leapt forth from my memory as soon as he started—it was "Tatu," the first piece on Disc Two of *Dark Magus*. It didn't have the thrash-metal fury of the original with only one guitarist, of course, but Finnerty played loud and hard. Jones' drumming was more complex than, but just as assaultive as, Al Foster's had been. Sonny Fortune switched from soprano saxophone to alto, and his playing was as free as at any point during the entire evening.

The last song of the set was as recognizable as "Directions" and the *On the Corner* and *Dark Magus* selections had been. Its hypnotic, whistling, mantra-like melody is probably the most immediate and compelling in all of Miles's 1970s discography—it's "Black Satin." This was the most visceral performance of it I'd ever heard too, much more rooted in funk than the original album version or, certainly, the electronic, clicking version on *In Concert*. The drums whacked out a savage rhythm, with the tablas accenting them beneath.

The sextet tore into "Black Satin" for nearly ten minutes, allowing Fortune, Wolff, and Finnerty to go wild on their respective instruments. Henderson and Jones locked in almost telepathically, creating a groove as muscular and tight as anything on the *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* box. And when the whole thing finally dissolved into noise, at the set's conclusion, there was a shocked, silent moment before the audience erupted in applause. It was as if they'd been stunned by the sheer force Henderson and company had mustered—as though they'd been expecting him, and the others as well, to have mellowed in middle age. No such luck.

Michael Henderson's tenure with Miles Davis was an exercise in underestimation and dismissiveness. It's a puzzle, really; did critics think the fact that he only played five notes meant he only *could* play five notes? Did they seriously think the pop market was clamoring for twenty-minute, side-long medleys with a hypnotic bottom end so heavy it was like a living thing in the room? More likely, jazz heads like the *Down Beat* critic who called *On the Corner* "nameless, faceless go-go music" were just looking for a quick way to shrug off music that repulsed them, which they didn't want to take the trouble to understand. The accusation of "selling out" has been jazz's doomsday weapon for decades, and Miles played right into critics' hands.

To me, Henderson is all the more interesting because of the disdain he had for jazz's politics. He loved being in Miles's band, and he still loves the music he made during those six years. But he was a funk and R&B player when he came on board, and he went right back to being one after he left. The only person Michael Henderson had to answer to, from 1970 to 1975, was Miles Davis. And that was exactly how both of them liked it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GUITAR

ELECTRIC GUITARS ARE NATURALLY disruptive and divisive instruments. There's a coldness to technology, a membrane that can't be pierced. No matter how raw and dirty the blues you're playing is, it's still dependent on a system of knobs and pedals and wires. When Miles incorporated guitarists'

techniques into his trumpet playing, that coldness was inculcated into his music. A wah-wah pedal is *not* the same thing as a plunger mute, no matter how similar the sound may seem on first hearing. Some people realize this and turn their backs. Others come running.

The presence of electric guitar is the one thing, if one must be chosen, that separates Miles Davis's electric music from everything before it. Many jazz performers have added guitar to their ensembles with little or no upheaval. But when Miles brought the instrument into his soundworld, it was part of a top-to-bottom revamping.

The first guitarist he hired was studio pro Joe Beck, who plays on "Circle in the Round," from the album of the same name, and "Water on the Pond," from *Directions*. He was strictly an in-studio guest, brought in for specific sessions, specific pieces. But what he brought to "Circle in the Round" was unexpected. Davis didn't want typical jazz chording from Beck. Instead, the guitarist provided a one-chord drone, like he was playing a gimbri, or an oud, not a guitar. This allowed the rest of the ensemble to swirl around him.

"Circle in the Round" isn't about exploratory improvisation. It reminds me of tracks from *Nefertiti*, in that soloing, though a part of the whole, is comparatively restrained. The horns play a mournful theme, over and over, and let the rhythm section shift and shuffle in place. Ron Carter's bassline walks and swings, but Herbie Hancock never takes advantage of it. He plays celeste instead of his usual (for the time) piano, and he makes it sound like a set of vibes. That, combined with Beck's North African, droning guitar, yields a fascinating sound. Tony Williams offers atmospheric cymbals, and Miles occasionally strikes churchlike bells. The piece is extraordinarily beautiful. It's also partly a Macero construction. There are obvious edits where sections were joined to each other in order to lengthen the piece and grant it some structural cohesion. Everything works. Though it's nearly a half hour long (and the version on the *Miles Davis Quintet 1965–68: The Complete Columbia Studio Recordings* box is even longer), it never seems to flag, and when it concludes, the listener is still left wanting more.

The same can't be said of "Water on the Pond," Beck's other appearance in the Davis company of players. On that track, his presence is barely felt. He's playing muted chords that almost seem like a parody of the timidity that makes so much jazz guitar eminently forgettable. The piece is only about seven minutes long, but it seems longer, never building much excitement. It lingered in the vaults from 1967 to 1981 for a reason.

In February 1968, George Benson became the second guitarist to drift into Davis's orbit. He was already somewhat known when he recorded "Sanctuary," "Side Car II" (these two appeared on *Circle in the Round*) and "Paraphernalia," from *Miles in the Sky*. He was an obvious disciple of Wes Montgomery, who was himself stylistically descended from pioneering jazz

guitarist Charlie Christian. Benson's smooth style occasionally revealed some real wit and creativity, beyond the predictable good taste that has kept many of his solo albums from taking flight. *Miles in the Sky* is one of Davis's most exciting records because it finds him catapulting himself headlong into a whole new kind of music. Benson's only along for the ride on "Paraphernalia," but his sound enlivens the tune. The same is true of his performance on "Side Car II." The piece contains long stretches of guitar/piano interaction that's often more interesting than what the horns are doing.

Benson also plays on the first recorded version of "Sanctuary," very different from the one on *Bitches Brew*. It features the quintet of Davis, Wayne Shorter, Hancock, Carter, and Tony Williams, with the guitar the only electric instrument, as on "Paraphernalia." In that sparse, primarily acoustic context, the guitar's sound becomes vital to the overall feel of the piece. It's an extraordinarily melancholy, drifting performance that's much more interesting than the better-known version from a year later. Still, Benson never dominated the band in any of his appearances with them.

There's no way you could say that about John McLaughlin. The actual content of his music with the band has been extensively discussed earlier in this book, but what McLaughlin represented is just as important as what he played. Although his jazz credentials were as correct as Benson's or Beck's, it was easy to perceive the Englishman as a rude interloper, especially given the raw, gritty music he was making with the band. Even on *In a Silent Way*, McLaughlin never played as smoothly or as "jazzily" with Miles as he was capable of doing. Davis instructed him, on that first session, to play like he didn't know how, and the guitarist did exactly that. His contribution is fairly minimal, but also deliberately simple, closer to garage rock (albeit nowhere near as loud) than anything in jazz.

McLaughlin's playing remained relatively crude on *Bitches Brew*. He stayed fairly toned down but played in an all-thumbs manner, giving the music a jagged edge. That's a good thing. Without his input, and that of the often-explosive drummers and percussionists, the sessions' three electric pianists might have turned the double album into another sea of squiggles and swirls, like its predecessor. It wasn't until Miles's various recording sessions of early 1970, though, that McLaughlin really began to cut loose, and play fierce, Albert King-esque blues-rock guitar, distorted and loud.

In his autobiography, Miles wrote that the guitar "can take you deep into the blues." The late 1960s and early 1970s were definitely the decade of the white boy blues, with Eric Clapton and the Allman Brothers Band, among others, releasing powerful records. Without explicitly stating as much (in fact, he rather famously insulted Clapton in an interview in the early 1970s), Miles seems to have wanted some of that energy in his own music. McLaughlin was the conduit for that desire.

The recordings of "Willie Nelson" and the "boxer songs" ("Archie Moore," "Johnny Bratton," "Ali," "Duran," and "Sugar Ray") on the *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* box reveal what Miles was after quite clearly. As discussed in Chapter Four, all these tracks were built around simple blues-funk basslines from Dave Holland, and all featured grimy, deceptively simple solos from McLaughlin. They're easily the hardest-rocking pieces Davis had recorded to date, with jazzy swing completely abandoned in favor of a muscular back-beat. (Jack DeJohnette's drumwork on "Go Ahead John" is breathtaking.)

Although McLaughlin was all over the studio recordings during 1969 and 1970, he very rarely played live with Davis. The one-off Cellar Door recordings from December 19, 1970 that made up the bulk of *Live-Evil* have already been discussed. There's another concert recording, though, taped at Hill Auditorium, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in February 1970, that features him with the live sextet of that time: Davis, Shorter, Corea, Holland, DeJohnette, and Moreira.

The set list contains no surprises: "It's About That Time," "I Fall in Love Too Easily," "Sanctuary," "Bitches Brew," "Masqualero," "The Theme," and so on. (Since the tape I have begins late, I choose to assume the set probably began with "Directions.") But McLaughlin's presence transforms the familiar material. "It's About That Time" is particularly ferocious. Its middle section is probably the freest I've ever heard any Miles band sound. Corea and DeJohnette are going totally over the top, Holland presumably joining in (the bootleg sound makes it hard to tell). Shorter and even Moreira play more wildly than usual too. But it's McLaughlin who takes over the piece, cranking out a totally unfettered, almost noise-rock solo. It's a clear precursor to the distorted, hornet-like assault he'd lay down on "Go Ahead John" only ten days later.

The guitarist doesn't contribute much to the next few tracks (the medley of "I Fall in Love Too Easily" and "Sanctuary" that Miles and Corea were performing in those days, and "Bitches Brew") but returns with a vengeance for "Masqualero." He's not using as much distortion on this second solo but is instead firing off notes like a machine-gun, with Jack DeJohnette whipping the rhythm into a froth behind him. It's a real shame that Columbia didn't commercially record this performance, because it's one more demonstration of the raucous, explosive power this band seems to have mustered just about every night, and with McLaughlin taking it up a level, the heights they scale are awe-inspiring.

Miles continued to work without a live guitarist for all of 1971 and the early part of 1972. Though he did appear on *On the Corner*, McLaughlin was more committed to Mahavishnu Orchestra. This situation allowed Michael Henderson's thick, funky basslines to become a dominant voice in the band. When Davis brought Reggie Lucas on board in early fall 1972, he was

exploring a whole new sound, so the role of the guitar was destined to be very different.

Lucas made his recorded debut with Davis on *In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall*. He doesn't solo once on the album. Part of this is due to the fact that the music being made isn't really about individual solos. *In Concert* is an album of electronic music, before there was such a thing. (The only people making music entirely out of synthesized and/or electronically processed elements during these years were a few European acts, Tangerine Dream and Kraftwerk most notably. There's a little bit of sonic similarity between "He Loved Him Madly" and TD's double album *Zeit*, but not much, and certainly no commonality of intent.)

In Concert is even more an ensemble effort than *On the Corner*. Everyone in the band is contributing either rhythm or drones. Thus, it's Lucas's job to comp rhythmically, pretty much sticking to one chord. Even Miles plays only a few quick two- or three-note jabs at a time. He's not interested in communicating emotionally, in bringing the audience with him the way he did when he was playing jazz—even electric jazz, like the music of the 1969, 1970, and 1971 bands. He's heading deeper into himself, and following his example, the whole ensemble is one giant humming hive, clattering and pinging and throwing tiny sounds back and forth across the stage, only rarely casting anything out beyond the proscenium.

There is one moment when Lucas is basically compelled to step forward and seize some solo territory—when the band launches into "Right Off" (credited, as it would be on future live recordings, as "Theme from Jack Johnson"). He's not only required to solo, but to live up to the standard set by McLaughlin on the studio album, which is pretty much a high-water mark of guitar in Miles's pre-1973 music. To put it bluntly, he's not up to it.

Lucas was an excellent funk rhythm guitarist, in the tradition of James Brown's bands. He chopped out his one-chord lines like there was no tomorrow, like the piece he was playing at that moment was going to go on forever. But he wasn't a lead player, and his solo on "Theme from Jack Johnson" proves it. It's competent, but not much more. It certainly doesn't lift the record out of the trance the band's been creating to that point. Lucas was the perfect guitarist for a band that didn't really need one. The 1972 band was all about electronics. Keyboards hummed and sputtered, electric sitar droned and twanged, amplified percussion clattered and clacked, and Miles soaked his every note in wah-wah.

A year later, Pete Cosey came in, sat down all the way across the stage from Lucas and did exactly the opposite thing, spinning out wild barbed-wire noise-rock leads. Reggie found his true calling with Miles then. It seemed like with each passing gig, he got deeper in the pocket. There are live tapes from 1973 that find him still soloing, still competing for space

with Cosey. But by 1974, that was over with. Reggie was the rhythm guitar player, and that was that. Eventually, even Michael Henderson started realizing he was a little freer to move around, to shift the bottom, because Lucas, Mtume, and Al Foster had become the rhythm section. On *Agharta* and *Pangaea,* Henderson and Cosey are communicating with each other, and Lucas takes over a kind of default bass-playing function, never moving from his spot. He might have been musically self-effacing, but he was vital to the music of the 1973–75 band.

Pete Cosey was a real discovery. A blues guitarist from Chicago and member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), he first got noticed playing some of the most acid-bathed solos on Muddy Waters' 1968 distortionfest *Electric Mud*. His raw, bluesy sound was what got him the job with Miles. In his autobiography, Davis says Cosey "gave me that Jimi Hendrix and Muddy Waters sound that I wanted." That's not a wholly fair assessment (the guitarist actually receives fairly dismissive treatment in the book), but it's a good starting point, at least.

Cosey was one of the most adventurous and consistently surprising guitarists of the 1970s, in any genre. His command of sound—feedback, amplifier buzz, even electronics on their own—left McLaughlin in the dust. In addition to guitar, Cosey played a tabletop's worth of Art Ensemble-style "little instruments" (bells, shakers, etc.) and the EMS Synthi A synthesizer. It's not a synthesizer in the way one typically thinks of those instruments. It's got no keyboard, only switches, knobs, and buttons. It's thus incapable of any real melodies and good only for abstract sounds. Fortunately, Cosey was a master of inserting those into the quieter moments of Miles's sets.

While Miles's name was on the marquee, Cosey was often the real star of the show, particularly between 1973 and 1975. Davis was still soloing at length, when he felt up to it, but his lead guitarist was frequently the most creative member of the band, making the most of every spotlight opportunity he got. He's all over both *Agharta* and *Pangaea*, roaring, screeching, snarling; his fingers fly across the fretboard, but it's more than mere technical showboating. Cosey used alternate tunings and dissonance long before avant-rockers like Sonic Youth made a fetish of them. The first time you hear him, he may seem to be working in a post-Hendrix mode. That's the easiest reference to make, but Pete and Jimi were actually contemporaries and likely took ideas from each other.

It's also important to remember that Cosey wasn't just a noise terrorist; he was more than capable of tender, melodic playing. The second disc of *Pangaea*, "Gondwana," certainly demonstrates that. The music, led more by Sonny Fortune's flute and Michael Henderson's throbbing, loping basslines than by Miles's trumpet, drifts for nearly an hour. It feels like Fourth World fusion before there was such a term, combining dubwise bass with tender,

muted horns, rock drumming, and African percussion. Cosey's guitar skitters peripatetically, like an animal moving from one hiding place to another, in a midnight desert.

Dominique Gaumont, the *third* guitarist in the band during 1974, also merits some discussion. A young African man from France, he was recruited without anybody else in the band having a voice in the decision. (This is more surprising than it seems. When Dave Liebman left, Miles asked Cosey to nominate a replacement. The guitarist suggested AACM stalwart Kalaparusha Maurice McIntyre, who played a single, disastrous concert with the group that damn near cost Cosey *his* job.) Cosey and Lucas have been quoted as saying the addition of a third guitar was a positive thing, but other bandmembers, Mtume in particular, thought it brought tension to the group, and found Gaumont's "European feel" to be superfluous.

Paul Tingen, author of *Miles Beyond*, also holds a relatively low opinion of Gaumont's work. He describes him, sequentially, as "crude and derivative of Hendrix," "a talented young guitarist who still had some way to go to reach his peak," and "a unique but not yet fully formed talent." All these descriptions are excessively reductive. Gaumont is all over the second disc of *Dark Magus*. It's that recording to which Tingen responds with these quotes, and I'm not sure we've heard the same album.

Though I admit Gaumont's a much more rock-oriented guitarist than Cosey, his work is hardly crude; in fact, his deployment of noise and distortion is sometimes subtler than the older man's. At one point, his guitar must have come unplugged, because the crunch of the amplifier kicking in is heard, at the end of a lengthy solo passage. But it would be impossible to determine whether this was accidental or deliberate, as it's timed exquisitely at the end of a phrase: The sound seems to punctuate the musical sentence he's been writing. And it's not as if Gaumont was able only to play long and loud. It's worth remembering that he's the lead guitarist on "He Loved Him Madly," playing the desolate, dark-side-of-the-moon blues that give that weeping epic so much of its power. I wish Dominique Gaumont had been in the band longer, and that more recordings of the three-guitar lineup had been released. To my ear, the heavier rock sound he brought in added immeasurably to the music.

When Miles returned from his five-year absence, his guitarist was Boston-based Mike Stern, a long-haired white boy very much like the ones satirized inside the *In Concert* sleeve—in fact, Stern had put in time with the whitest of the jazz-rock crossover acts, Blood, Sweat and Tears! That didn't give any indication of his skill level, though. The kid could play his ass off, and he could combine jazz chording with metal/hard-rock pyrotechnics, resulting in an outrageous, groove-attuned blend of power and much more subtlety than he was given credit for at the time.

Writeups of Miles's comeback shows are interesting. Bob Blumenthal's take on the gigs, from the *Boston Globe*, is still worth reading today—check it out while listening to *We Want Miles*. He writes,

> *On the one hand, history teaches us to expect that Davis will be the harbinger of changed directions and the herald of undiscovered genius. When he isn't, we feel shortchanged. Concurrently, the constants of Davis's sound and manner ensure that we will respond.*

In other words, Miles was, to Blumenthal's ear, giving people what they wanted, while continuing to travel down his own aesthetic path. Enough time had passed since the 1974–75 band's dissipation that their music was preserved mostly in the unreliable memories of eyewitnesses. (Remember that *Dark Magus* and *Pangaea* weren't released in America until the 1990s). Thus it's entirely possible that when Blumenthal described the music of Miles, circa 1981, as the trumpeter "pick[ing] up where he left off, with open-ended, vamp-driven, funky electric jamming," he really thought he remembered the earlier music being closer in spirit to the new stuff than it actually was.

While there were superficial similarities, this view discounts the drum-tight togetherness of the 1981 band, as well as how much they prioritized composition over improvisation. When Miles came back, he did something he hadn't done since about 1968: He broke up his band's sets into discrete tunes, with pauses for applause. He even seemed to structure the band's music to embrace the jazz tradition he'd so long ignored, and allow applause after each musician's solos. For years, the music had been a solid mass, with peaks and valleys but without breaks. If dropping the band out so that one instrument, be it Pete Cosey's guitar or Miles's own stabs at the keyboard, can be heard counts as a "solo," then the 1974–75 band had those. But the 1981 band was all about individual instrumental showcases (or showboating). And no one benefited from this new policy more than Mike Stern.

The guitarist got nearly as much solo space during the band's concerts as the boss, and sometimes more. The epic version of "Jean Pierre" that opens *We Want Miles* is proof enough of this. Stern's jazzy comping provides at least as much of the piece's foundation as Marcus Miller's bass and Al Foster's drums. But when Miles finishes his solo, the guitarist assumes the lead role with commanding authority. His fleet fingering, and screaming feedback and sustain, send the piece hurtling skyward. Of course, this was exactly what some critics hated about Stern. They claimed he polluted the stage with heavy metal theatrics, seizing on his long hair, which Davis would occasionally stroke while Stern played, as the external manifestation of a flawed musical character.

Blumenfeld's description is accurate in one respect: Stern's role in the 1981 band was almost exactly what Pete Cosey's had been in the mid-seventies band. He was Miles's alter ego, the way John Coltrane and Wayne Shorter had been in prior eras. The music was simpler, though, stripped nearly to the chassis. Thus Stern's contributions were thrown into much sharper relief. Also, his style was much cleaner than Cosey's, almost free of the post-Hendrixian fetish for distortion and noise that had ruled rock since the late 1960s. Stern was a pioneer in bringing to jazz guitar the new, gleaming pop-metal sound that would rule the radio throughout the 1980s. His sound was airtight and buffed to a mirror finish, much more Eddie Van Halen than Jimi Hendrix.

It's not surprising that Miles latched onto Stern. It's actually more surprising that he stuck with the grit and grime of McLaughlin, Cosey, and Dominique Gaumont for as long as he did. Davis had always been attracted to cleanliness of style, whether in his own playing or others'. He told a story, many times, of his trumpet teacher pounding into his head, and those of his fellow pupils, never to play with vibrato, because there'd be plenty of time for that when they got old and their hands started to shake while holding the horn. Right up until the early 1970s, when he began exploring the wah-wah pedal, Miles had never been one to go for squeaks or growls, or other noise effects, and he generally didn't seek that in his backing musicians either. The few times that he did wind up with genuinely noisy, ugly tracks—"Go Ahead John," for example, from *On the Corner* or "Rated X"—are notable precisely because of their exceptionality. The inability of his 1969–70 quintet/sextet to tempt him into free blowing, even when they went out, further underscores his tendency toward the lyrical and the conventionally beautiful.

It's also interesting to note that the 1981 band was Miles's last not to feature a full-time keyboard player. He played most, if not all, of the brief synth parts that appear on the live albums *We Want Miles* and *Miles! Miles! Miles!* himself. In 1982, with the recording of *Star People*, the synths would return, and they'd never leave again. Indeed, there were times in the mid-1980s when they'd pretty much take over the band. Even during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the music was something of a battleground between the electric pianos and organs, which Davis used as smoothing influences, and the guitars, which he used to jar things loose and knock the sound off balance.

This was most obvious, of course, on *Bitches Brew* and *In a Silent Way*. On these two records, the doubled (and sometimes trebled) electric pianos became an ocean of sound, waves swirling and rippling but never cresting or breaking. John McLaughlin's guitar, though, rose from that sea of essentially smooth keyboard tones like a shark's fin, never totally breaching but hinting at menace, there below the surface. Miles, of course, floated above

the ocean entirely, like an albatross with wings spread wide, circling, untouchable, in the sky.

In 1972, too, the music was something of a battle for supremacy between keyboards and guitars. In this case, as discussed above, Reggie Lucas was pretty much outclassed. He didn't find his place in the band until Miles fired the keyboardist and brought in Pete Cosey.

In 1981, though, there was no keyboard player, and Mike Stern blossomed fully within the hard, urban, almost pre-hip-hop sound. A year later, he was joined by John Scofield. This version of the band, though it went almost totally unrecorded, has been described by witnesses as Miles's best of the 1980s. The new second guitarist's playing wasn't nearly as rock-informed as Stern's. Scofield was an R&B and funk player, moving easily from a Catfish Collins one-chord chunk to a stinging Ernie Isley-style solo. Still, the two men meshed their styles brilliantly.

The Scofield/Stern team appears only on two tracks from any Davis album—"Speak/That's What Happened" and "It Gets Better," from 1982's *Star People*. The album, one of Miles's bluesiest, features airtight grooves from the same band that had recorded *We Want Miles* and *Miles! Miles! Miles!* the year before, with one exception: Bassist Tom Rainey replaces Marcus Miller on "Speak/That's What Happened." Stern takes the first solo after the theme is played, and like much of the material on *We Want Miles*, it's heavily rock-inflected, with lots of crunch and squealing scales. By contrast, when Scofield steps forward, he plays cleaner, combining thick chords and stabbing single lines and letting himself be prodded forward by trumpet and keyboard jabs from Davis. The track is excellent, funky jazz-rock, and demonstrates the differences between the two players' styles beautifully.

The two-guitar sound was different in 1983 than it had been a decade earlier. In the previous band, there had been a defined lead guitarist (Pete Cosey) and a defined rhythm guitarist (Reggie Lucas). In the new group, Stern and Scofield traded off leads, in the manner of Judas Priest or Iron Maiden. Since there are only two studio tracks featuring the two-guitar band, the best way to hear them in action is on live tapes. A concert from New Year's Eve 1982 is particularly excellent.

The band's in extremely funky form, spinning the grooves out for long stretches and giving the percussionist and drummer nearly as much leeway as the lead instrumentalists. Indeed, much the way he did in the 1970s, Miles allows the band to pretty much take over the show for much of the performance. The melodies are short and punchy, and Davis doesn't elaborate on them, when constructing his solos, as much as he did in earlier years. He makes a series of concise statements, rather than heading into

abstraction as he'd done in the late 1960s, or using the trumpet as a percussion instrument, like in the seventies funk band.

Scofield and Stern follow the boss's lead in the construction of their own solos. The newer guitarist, in particular, keeps things crisp and clean. Rather than work with distortion and power chords, like Stern, he picks out biting lines that tear through the air like diamond-tipped bullets. He seems most comfortable as a rhythm guitarist, often choosing to lock in with Marcus Miller's bass rather than explore the outer reaches.

In 1983, Stern left the band; he'd been having booze and drug problems for a while, and they finally took over to the extent that he was no longer the valuable member of the group he'd once been. Scofield remained, serving as sole guitarist for live appearances and on *Decoy* and *You're Under Arrest*, except for guest appearances from John McLaughlin on "Katia" and "Ms. Morrisine," from the latter record. (Stern returned, briefly, in 1986, following Scofield's departure, and prior to the arrival of Robben Ford. Miles would never have two guitarists in the band again.)

Scofield was an unusual hire for Miles. The guitarist was older than many of the trumpeter's previous sidemen, already thirty-one when he joined the band and with plenty of professional experience. Therefore, his style was pretty firmly in place. He wasn't someone Miles could mold and shape, as he liked to do. Still, the guitarist's open mind and apparent willingness to grow through experimentation were qualities Davis had always admired in any player, and they made Scofield one of the best sidemen he had during these years. It's almost weird to look at what he's done since, particularly the narcoleptic jam-funk albums of recent years, and compare it to the promise he showed in the mid-1980s.

During the rest of his final decade, Miles would work with many guitarists, both live and in the studio. Only one made any major impact on the live band, though.

Robben Ford was the live guitarist from April to December 1986. His tenure with the band was uneventful, and thus minimally documented. As heard on the twenty-CD boxed set *The Complete Miles Davis at Montreux 1973–1991*, his work is pleasant enough, but he's basically holding to the patterns established by his predecessors, without taking the music in any interesting directions of his own. When he left at year's end, five players made runs at the guitar chair—Garth Webber, Dwayne "Blackbyrd" McKnight, Hiram Bullock, Bobby Broom and Alan Burroughs. None lasted more than a few months; Burroughs was a one-night guest.

The most interesting of the short-timers, both as a player and a choice, was McKnight. He'd previously worked with both Herbie Hancock and Parliament-Funkadelic, and his screaming lead style was very much in the

vein of other veterans of George Clinton's circle, like Eddie Hazel and Michael Hampton. He was the most over-the-top guitarist Miles had employed since Pete Cosey. In fact, some time after leaving Davis's band, McKnight was briefly a member of the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Finally, Miles settled on what he wanted, and it wasn't a guitar at all. Joe "Foley" McCreary joined the band in May 1987 and stayed until Miles's death in 1991, playing "lead bass." This meant that McCreary had rigged a bass to provide a fatter, richer tone than any guitar could achieve, while still playing the high-speed runs and dive-bombs that Miles was after at that point.

In the latter part of the 1980s, Miles no longer seemed to want anything even remotely jazzy from his guitar players. (This is probably why Bobby Broom, to name one, didn't work out. His solo albums indicate that he's very much an old-style jazz guitarist, most comfortable working in the vein of Grant Green.) Davis was after a high-powered, glossy hard rock sound, like that of Eddie Van Halen or Journey's Neal Schon. Foley McCreary was just the guy to provide this sound. In fact, Davis and keyboardist Adam Holzman wrote a piece called "Heavy Metal," which was never recorded in the studio but appears on the Montreux box. It's nothing more than a showcase for Foley's fingers, and he makes the most of it.

The two-part piece ("Heavy Metal Prelude" and "Heavy Metal") is like nothing else in the evening's performance, or in Miles's catalog. It's not really metal, of course. It has none of metal's Wagnerian stomp. Indeed, the 1988 band, with Ricky Wellman on drums, was one of Miles's funkiest groups, incorporating both Latin rhythms (from percussionist Marilyn Mazur) and straight-up go-go beats from the D.C. streets. Atop this churning rhythm, the keyboards repeat a five-note theme over and over, vamping for five minutes straight with some hot soloing from Miles. The second half, though, is all Foley. The rhythm is just as danceable, but the keyboards have gotten a little more ominous, grinding and growling like the beginning of Van Halen's ". . . And The Cradle Will Rock."

On top of that solid foundation, the bassist/guitarist goes wild. His solo, which starts about ninety seconds into the piece and goes all the way to the end, is loaded with crunches worthy of Neil Young, whammy-bar and dive-bomb action that any 1980s L.A. shredder would drool to emulate, and fingering that's simply *ridiculous* to contemplate with a bass's long neck and thick strings. It's an awe-inspiring performance, and Davis and everyone else just stands out of the way, letting him go, and go, and go. When he finally stops, there's a moment of silence before the audience erupts in applause. And on the very next song, "Don't Stop Me Now," he goes right back into delicate ballad picking, like nothing just happened. Bassist he might have been, but Foley McCreary was one of the most impressive guitarists Miles ever hired.

The sounds Davis demanded from his guitarists demonstrate, more clearly than anything before, why he incorporated the instrument into his music in the first place. Miles knew, before anyone else, that the guitar was no longer a jazz instrument, not after rock 'n' roll. Once rock achieved cultural dominance, with the electric guitar its most prominent and obvious signifier, the instrument no longer belonged, in any real sense, to any music but rock. Thus, an embrace of the electric guitar signified an embrace of rock as equally valid as jazz. This was a position Miles seemed not only willing but eager to stake out. Part of it was a reconnection with the blues that had always been central to his music, but a significant component of his guitar-based music involved pushing the envelope in ways reminiscent of the progressive rock of the time.

It's also important to remember that in the early 1970s, by playing before rock audiences, Miles's bands were reclaiming the amplified electric guitar as a *black* instrument. In the wake of Jimi Hendrix's death, there were no black rock guitarists of any note. Funkadelic's Eddie Hazel and Michael Hampton were superb players, but as their band name indicates, they slipped between two worlds. They weren't really considered rock musicians, but their guitar-heavy sound didn't find many welcoming black ears at the time, either. Within the overwhelmingly white rock scene, Funkadelic barely existed (and forget about their black-audience-friendly opposite number, Parliament).

Even Hendrix, during his lifetime, was viewed as sort of "not really black." This was rumored to be part of what led him to play benefit concerts for the Black Panthers and to form the Band of Gypsys. After his death, of course, it just got worse: Hendrix is now an almost exclusively white icon, routinely lionized on the covers of guitar magazines and often placing high in polls in *Rolling Stone*, *Mojo*, and other journals with largely white audiences. But his reputation in the black music world is virtually nil. The only figure from the hip-hop generation to cite Jimi as an influence is Wyclef Jean, who seems himself to sell more records to white fans than black ones.

So Miles, by hiring two (and then three) black guitarists in the early 1970s, was making a statement, and a strong one at that. The music the band was playing, particularly in 1974 and 1975, was harder than most rock, funkier than most funk, and more ambitious than any of the fusion being offered by his former sidemen. That's why his records still sound vital and powerful today, while albums by the Headhunters, Return to Forever, and Weather Report frequently seem over-thought and under-felt.

While Miles was away, during the latter half of the 1970s, some of what he'd been doing began to filter into the larger music scene. Ornette Coleman's Prime Time band, featuring two electric guitarists and an electric

bassist, adapted the saxophonist's ideas about free improvisation based on melody, called "harmolodics," to intricate funk on albums like *Body Meta* and *Dancing in Your Head*. A few years later, in the early 1980s, as Davis was returning to public prominence, drummer Ronald Shannon Jackson (who'd played with Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, and Ornette) was combining jazz, funk, rock, and hillbilly music in the Decoding Society. One of his first guitarists was a young Hendrix disciple named Vernon Reid, who'd later form the most prominent black rock band of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Living Colour. James "Blood" Ulmer, a guitarist who'd worked with Prime Time, also began to release so-called "harmolodic funk" albums like *Black Rock*, *Are You Glad to Be In America?*, and *Tales of Captain Black*.

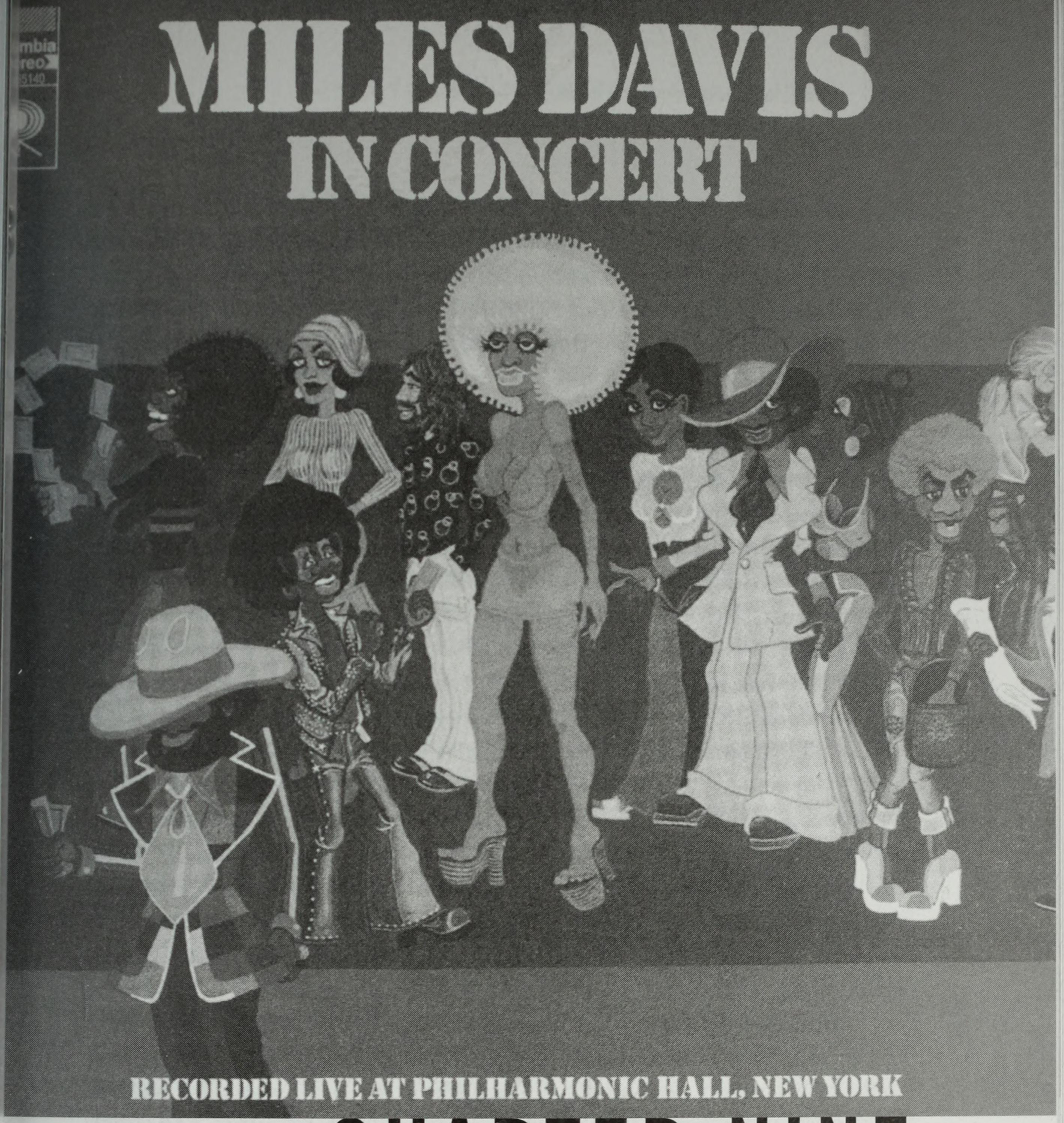
Ironically, the early and middle 1980s were a pretty good time for black musicians in rock, particularly in the realm of punk and post-punk. The Bad Brains, four Rastas from Washington, D.C., were one of the most headlong, furious, and widely admired bands in hardcore punk. They shifted seamlessly between 1000 mph punk rants and devoutly spiritual reggae/dub jams. Living Colour's debut album *Vivid* carved out a space for itself on the pop charts and rock radio with a mix of soulful vocals, powerhouse funk-metal rhythms, and Vernon Reid's guitar, which was at that point equal parts Hendrixian fury and art-rock influenced by King Crimson's Robert Fripp. Their second album, *Time's Up*, was even more stylistically wide-ranging, and consequently better. Fishbone, 24/7 Spyz, and Underdog were also blending punk, funk, metal, jazz, and any other music they admired into viscerally compelling anthems. And, of course, we can't forget about Prince, who rarely missed an opportunity to whip out a stinging guitar solo.

By the time all this was going on, though, Miles had moved his music in another direction. Much of the aggressive energy of the 1970s band, which had gradually filtered down into the black rock bands cited above, was absent from Davis's records and live performances. He was more interested than ever in funk, but now it was the commercial funk of the R&B charts, rather than the improvisatory acid funk of before. Keyboards, punchy riffs, and rhythms that were more danceable than driving were the watchword. Pieces became shorter. While the stripped-down, keyboardless band of 1981–83 played jagged, threatening grooves that might have fit comfortably next to those of Ulmer or the Decoding Society, the bands Miles was fielding after 1984 sounded more like Cameo or Prince.

Until the end of his onstage career, though, guitars played a prominent role in Davis's music. Even in the late 1980s, when he was incorporating go-go and zouk rhythms, playing a punchier, more danceable kind of world-funk-rock than the swirling roar he'd created in the seventies, Foley McCreary's lead bass took pride of place, as described above. Indeed, he was more likely to get a solo spot in a given song than anybody except the boss

himself. (The same was true of the 1983 band with Mike Stern and John Scofield; saxophonist Bill Evans left because he felt his time was increasingly being curtailed in favor of more and longer guitar solos.)

Miles never abandoned his fondness for the electric guitar until his final record, the posthumously released hip-hop album *Doo-Bop*. As jazz in general became more and more a shadow of its former self, whether by devolving into the Muzak-y "smooth" style that now rules jazz radio or by becoming museum music, Davis kept on confounding expectations. He'd made his disdain for the word "jazz" clear since going electric, and had demonstrated an increasing sonic inclusiveness as the years went on. Though his music incorporated specific rhythms and sounds from pop and R&B, it was more complex than anything that might have inspired it. His use of guitar was one of the major ways in which he took mainstream sounds and pushed them one step beyond what anyone else was doing.



CHAPTER NINE

RATED X (1972–1975)

THE LAST MUSIC MILES MADE BEFORE retiring was the most aggressive, hard-driving, and "difficult" (some have said unlikable) of his career. It made no concessions to listeners, critics, or anyone else. This phase began with 1972's *On the Corner*, and lasted through the twin double live albums *Agharta* and

Pangaea. In the years since Miles's death, numerous other recordings have emerged, opening more windows into his and his band's methods in these astonishing years. *On the Corner*'s already been discussed, as have individual tracks from other albums. But Davis released one single and five double albums in four years during this period, so detailed analysis of the rest is surely merited.

By any standard, after all, that's a shocking level of productivity—more shocking still when you realize that Miles didn't record or release anything in 1973. In 1972 he made *On the Corner* and *In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall*. In 1974, he recorded tracks for *Get Up With It*, and *Dark Magus*. And in 1975, he recorded the twin double albums *Agharta* and *Pangaea*. He didn't spend 1973 sitting on the couch, of course. He'd just formed the band he'd keep together, with only minor changes, until his retirement, and he wanted to road-test them, get his sound together. Once he had a sense of what his players were really capable of, he got out there and played almost constantly, night after night, for two straight years.

What brought this energy out of Miles? Maybe it was the youth of his band. Maybe it was the rush of performing music that was pissing off so many people, generating so many wounded, combative, and condescending reviews. Miles took pleasure in driving people he didn't respect crazy, and the funk band of 1973–75 *certainly* did that. It makes me wish he'd lived long enough to see the critical reassessment records like *On the Corner* and *Dark Magus* have gotten in the 1990s and beyond, often from younger writers who weren't around when the albums were released.

Although the music Miles was making was as exciting and innovative as anything he'd done in previous decades, it was no longer anything that could be accurately documented in the studio. Recording sessions became chances to experiment—with arrangements, with alterations in personnel, but particularly with technology and methodology. As in earlier decades, albums were useful marketing tools, but *On the Corner* was the last one to be a sweeping artistic statement along the lines of *Kind of Blue* or *Sketches of Spain*. Miles wouldn't return to the idea of the album-as-gesture or album-as-manifesto until *Star People*—and it could be argued that he didn't really embrace the album-making process again until *Tutu*.

Miles formed a new band in 1972, specifically to play the music from *On the Corner* live. This band, as heard on *In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall*, wasn't as rock-based as later incarnations. The rhythm section that would do much to define the group's sound in the coming years was already in place, though: Michael Henderson on bass, Mtume on percussion, and Al Foster on drums. These three would form a virtually airtight axis, pivoting the band in any direction they or their boss desired at a moment's notice. Sole guitarist Reggie Lucas was competing for space with

electric piano, percussion, trumpet, and saxophone—and, for the last time, the Indian instruments of sitar and tablas.

The 1972 band signaled the end of Miles's fascination with Indian music—or, more accurately, Indian musical instruments. During the late 1960s, many rock bands—and thus, the hip scene as a whole—began delving into Eastern philosophies and art, particularly music. This was a period when Ravi Shankar could play a rock festival, and the stoned masses would applaud wildly as he tuned his sitar, *before* actually beginning the raga he'd come to perform. A few psychedelic bands began inserting sitars, or Indian-sounding scales played on the guitar, or even guitars designed solely to *sound* like sitars, into their songs during these years, too. And for a few years (roughly 1969–72), Miles employed sitarists Khalil Balakrishna and Colin Walcott, as well as tabla player Badal Roy.

Despite the presence of these instruments throughout *On the Corner*, *Big Fun*, *Get Up With It*, and *In Concert*, Davis never seems to have taken any interest in actually adapting non-Western compositional concepts into his music. He wanted a drone, but he didn't want a raga. Listen to any of those albums and try to find a solo spot granted to the sitar player. You'll be waiting a long time; there aren't any. To Miles, the instrument was an interesting additional source of background noise, like a rhythm guitar with microtonal capability.

There were only two brief periods during which Davis employed Indian instruments in his ensembles. The first was immediately after the recording of *Bitches Brew*, during two sessions in November 1969. The tracks in question, "Great Expectations," "Orange Lady," and a few others, appear on the *Complete Bitches Brew Sessions* boxed set. At two later sessions in January and February 1970, Balakrishna appears again, on "Lonely Fire," "Guinnevere," "Double Image," and a few other tracks. After these recordings, Miles would strip the band down to its core, and begin working on the raucous blues-rock that eventually generated all the material on the *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* box. There was no longer any room for the droning passivity of the sitar.

Perhaps no track exemplifies what Indian instrumentation brought to (or did to) Miles's music better than "Great Expectations," which opens *Big Fun*. It's built around a four-note bass riff that sounds like the theme to *Peter Gunn*. Balakrishna's sitar creates a rising tone that repeats like a looped sample, and the main melody line, played by Miles and bass clarinetist Bennie Maupin, repeats nearly twenty times, with no variation. There are no real solos, but the rhythm players and the keyboardists shift around quite a bit. Like some of the tracks from *Nefertiti*, it reverses the traditional polarity of a jazz track, changing up the rhythm while making the front line repetitive. Nearly fourteen minutes long all by itself, "Great Expectations" is edited together with the more melodic "Orange Lady," and the resultant piece is a

single twenty-seven-minutes-plus slab of music that occupies all of Side One of the vinyl. "Orange Lady" is more active than "Great Expectations," but the two make a fine suite.

The second time Miles used sitars and tablas in the band was during the recording of *On the Corner*. That time, they were a more organic and, frankly, crucial part of the sound—a steady hum to balance the clatter of guitars, saxophones, funky drums, and Miles's own relentlessly wah-wahed trumpet, all of which competed for space in the listener's head. The gentle drone of the sitars fit seamlessly with the album's four keyboards and provided an ideal counterpoint to John McLaughlin's and Dave Liebman's squeals and snarls, not to mention Jack DeJohnette's repetitive, hypnotic drum patterns.

Though *On the Corner*'s credits are mysterious, the sitarist on that album was probably Colin Walcott. Three months later, though, Khalil Balakrishna returned for the recording of "Rated X," from *Get Up With It*, and the *In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall* album. He also appeared on "Billy Preston," recorded in December 1972. That was the last time a sitar was brought to any Miles Davis session.

In Concert is interesting as much for what it doesn't contain as for what it does. The set concentrates on relatively new material—the oldest composition is "Right Off," credited as "Theme from Jack Johnson." (Miles would call it that for the rest of his life, even in the mid-1980s, when he brought it back into the set for the first time in a decade.) Other pieces, like "Black Satin," "Ife," and "Rated X," were brand new, recorded less than three months before the September 29 concert. In fact, *none* of the new material was familiar to the audience the night of the show—*On the Corner* wouldn't be released until the fall. "Ife" and "Rated X" wouldn't turn up, in studio versions, until 1974, on *Big Fun* and *Get Up With It* respectively. So in September of 1972, Miles was really asking his listeners to make a leap of faith, filling an entire ninety-minute set with songs most people hadn't heard. After all, even *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, released in early 1971, was barely publicized—the label's focus, at that point, was the double album *At Fillmore*.

In Concert was much more electronic than anything after. It didn't have much in common with earlier live records like *At Fillmore* and *Black Beauty*. The visceral, full-throttle impact of those performances, particularly the latter one, gave way on *In Concert* to a meditative, exploratory feel. Instruments shot brief dashes of notes back and forth across the Philharmonic's stage. Badal Roy's tablas and Mtume's congas conversed, Cedric Lawson's keyboards and Khalil Balakrishna's electric sitar hummed and droned, and Reggie Lucas added one-chord funk vamps, locked in with Michael Henderson's bass, to sew the music together over Al Foster's beats. The two horn players, Miles and saxophonist Carlos Garnett, played in

short spurts and squiggles, often sticking close to the hypnotic, looping melodies of tunes like "Black Satin" and "Ife."

The band didn't stay together long. By the summer of 1973, Badal Roy, Khalil Balakrishna, Carlos Garnett and Cedric Lawson were all gone. Miles no longer wanted a full-time keyboardist, or any Indian flavors. Instead, he was after a harder, funkier sound. Toward this end, he brought in second guitarist Pete Cosey. Saxophonist Dave Liebman, who'd played the first solo, by any instrument, on *On the Corner*, was finally hired as a full-time bandmember too.

The first tracks this group laid to tape were "Big Fun" and "Holly-Wuud," the two sides of a single that was released to virtually no public impact. I've never heard them; they've never been bonus tracks on any of the CD reissues of his 1970s albums. The next track recorded was "Calypso Frelimo," a side-long jam from *Get Up With It*. It's a piece that probably doesn't get the attention it deserves, because "He Loved Him Madly" is what most people remember from that album.

"Calypso Frelimo" does feature the tempo and rhythm indicated in its title, but there are slower and faster sections. Some parts are as drifting and nearly amorphous as "He Loved Him Madly" or the first half of "Yesternow." Miles and Liebman solo, the latter playing flute, and they're joined by one more horn player: saxophonist John Stubblefield, making his only appearance with Miles. All play at high levels. They're *almost* equaled by Pete Cosey. But at this point in his musical journey with Davis, the guitarist was more erratic than he'd become in the years that followed. His solo doesn't have the cohesion of what he'd play on *Dark Magus*, *Agharta*, or *Pangaea*. When he plays the sort of "lead rhythm" riffs that became his trademark style, he's brilliant, but at times, his work dissolves into noise-making to fill space, and Sonny Sharrock was always better at that.

Cosey's guitar sound changed quite a bit between 1973 and 1975. He definitely had a vision from the beginning—he took the feedback experiments of Jimi Hendrix's final years and combined them with the spacey post-R&B of Funkdadelic's Eddie Hazel and quite a few amazing ideas of his own. But he was constantly innovating and expanding his sonic palette, investing in gadgets and devices to change the sound of his guitar into something totally otherworldly and unprecedented. But that was toward the end. When he started playing with Miles, his work was more stripped-down and less reliant on pedals and switches—not as distinctive as it would become. This is the Pete Cosey who's heard on "Calypso Frelimo," and on live recordings from the spring, summer and fall of 1973, taped in Tokyo, Montreux, and Belgrade, respectively.

The first thing you hear, listening to the Tokyo concert as documented on a bootleg called *More Live Evil*, is that the band is still rough, still

congealing. Henderson and Foster are locked in tight, but the guitarists haven't yet worked out each other's role or their relationship to each other, so they're both plowing ahead full steam, figuring they'll come up with something if and when a solo spot opens.

Miles's horn is plugged in, the wah-wah pedal soaking into the air and vaporizing the notes into a cloud of shimmering echoes. He's playing more, and less, than he was with the last lineup—more notes, but less because he's further out, less rooted in melody, than before. He's starting to treat the trumpet as a percussion instrument sometimes too, blatting repetitively like a car alarm.

Dave Liebman, only in the band two months at the time of the show, is blowing even more freely than his boss. He seems to be playing through some kind of pedal too. During one nearly forty-five-minute unnamed piece, his soprano sax sounds more like an electric violin than any reed I've ever heard.

The guitar solos are crunchier than they'd later become, more acid-rock than the pyrotechnic metal of 1975. Cosey chops the music up, churns it into a chunky stew. And given that a bunch of the signature pieces heard on *Dark Magus*, *Agharta*, and *Pangaea* (signature riffs is probably more accurate) haven't been developed yet, most of what they're playing is as improvisatory as it would ever be. It's much more akin to the work of 1980s out-jazz/noise-rock quartet Last Exit, who broke up when the members collectively decided their music had become predictable, than any funk or fusion outfit.

Three months later, at the Montreux festival, everything is tighter and more disciplined. The signature riffs *have* emerged by this point, particularly the headlong charge that would open concerts for the next three years. There are three untitled medleys listed as "Miles in Montreux," parts 1–3, but otherwise the group is back to performing distinct pieces, including "Ife" and "Calypso Frelimo," rather than just crashing ahead for the length of their set. Liebman's no longer employing electronic effects on his horn, and Miles's use of the wah-wah pedal is much more subtle than in Japan. There are even points at which he doesn't use it at all. Pete Cosey's guitar solos are still crackling storms, but they're starting to become spacier. Michael Henderson's bass is starting to take a lead role, with Reggie Lucas vamping on one chord to keep the rhythm section on track. This is a really interesting transitional concert, included in the *Complete Miles at Montreux 1973–1991* twenty-CD boxed set but worthy of separate release.

In autumn 1973, Miles took the band on a tour of Eastern Europe. One show, from Belgrade, takes up the second disc of the Jazz Door release *Another Bitches Brew* (Disc One is from the same city, circa 1971). The individual compositions are gone; the band plays one forty-five-minute piece. It

moves through sections, defined mostly by changes in the bassline or quick trumpet cues. Many of the riffs the band would employ live until 1975 are in place, though the set doesn't begin with the full-on assault that most concerts from 1974 and 1975 would use as a fanfare. Instead, things start off cautiously, almost as though the bandmembers are feeling their way around a house they've only recently built and moved into. The initial groove is slow and shuffling, closer to Funkadelic's "I Bet You" than James Brown's "Brother Rapp," but definitely rooted in the sound of the early 1970s.

Playing all three of these shows (five CDs' worth of music) sequentially, it's easy to hear the sound of a band coming together, becoming one, and at the same time hear each member of the group finding his place in the collective sound. The stage was serving as a rehearsal space. None of the music they were playing would ever be recorded in a studio, either. It was all fodder for the live shows, and nothing more. Maybe Miles figured it was so raw that it couldn't be adequately captured in the studio, and he wanted to save that time for more experimental pieces. Or maybe he just liked blasting packed houses with raw amplifier noise and thundering drums too much to bring the band in off the road. Whatever the reason, the fact is that if you want to hear what Miles Davis was doing in 1973, bootlegs are pretty much your only option.

From late 1973 to 1975, Miles's live sets became solid masses of music. He'd never been one for long pauses between tunes, anyway; it wasn't like he was going to stop and address the audience. Some bands took the continuous-set concept further than others. The 1969 electric group had played nonstop, using melodic phrases to shift gears. But the pieces that band played—"Footprints," "I Fall in Love Too Easily," "Directions"—were complex, so the sections remained clearly discernible from one another. The 1973–75 band, by contrast, mostly offered material built around Michael Henderson's churning basslines.

These compositions had more in common than not. That's hardly a criticism; most hard bop tunes sound pretty much alike. But this relative uniformity made it easy for Miles to keep the band charging forward for an hour straight. Reggie Lucas's one-chord vamping didn't change much from one tune to the next. Nor did Mtume's frenetic percussion, or Al Foster's gigantic backbeat. What changed was the up-front sound: the trumpet, the saxophone, the lead guitar, and the bass.

Although there were no stops in Davis's concerts, he began using drop-outs as a source of drama. Just when the band was at full steam, they'd all stop simultaneously, except for one chosen player. Most of the time, this was either Pete Cosey or Sonny Fortune, though every once in a while Mtume would get a turn in the spotlight. It was a method similar to that employed by dub reggae producers, who would isolate a single instrument, often the

bassline or hi-hat, to disorienting effect. Miles, on the other hand, wanted to focus the listeners on the guitar solo, so that when the rest of the septet (or, in 1974, the octet) came back in, the effect was like bending over to look at a particularly beautiful seashell on the ocean floor, only to have a gigantic wave crash right on your head. This trick is repeated dozens of times during the concert recorded on *Agharta*, but it never loses its potency.

Miles's trumpet sound changed during the early 1970s too. He'd started using the wah-wah pedal in 1971 and taken it to almost lunatic extremes on *On the Corner*, but on the road from 1973 to 1975, he really began to explore all the subtle possibilities electronics afforded him. The wah-wah pedal is capable of a wide range of sounds, particularly when affixed to a trumpet, the sound of which is already manipulatable with the lips, tongue, and breath.

Davis seemed to study electronics as he went. In his autobiography, he stated that his original intention was to make himself sound like a guitar, but that's not at all what happened. Rather than limit the sound, the way it might with a guitarist, the wah-wah pedal radically expanded Miles's sonic palette. To jazz-trained ears, this expansion was a negative thing. Critics asserted that the electronics camouflaged his tone. But in fact, it created a new tone, the wiggly, shimmering ribbons of sound that are heard on *Agharta* and *Pangaea*.

Even with the pedal depressed, Miles retained an astonishing degree of delicacy in his playing. Always a master of ballads, he used electronics to stretch his lines out in ways that defied the traditional limitations imposed by human lung capacity. The wah-wah pedal and echo devices also added an additional air of melancholy to what he was playing. This is, again, particularly noticeable on *Agharta* and *Pangaea*, when his solos quite often seem to be twisted streams of raw pain. Even at the most upbeat moments, his playing feels desperate, panicky, like a man running through a darkened city, casting his eyes all around him, trying to spot invisible attackers. Miles spits notes out like he's throwing knives into the blackness, while the music all around him roars and convulses.

At times, of course, the electronic sound of the trumpet allowed Davis to disappear into the ensemble, to be swallowed up by the churning (but not at all chaotic, despite contemporaneous assertions) morass of the rest of the band. This was why he chopped the music up, forcing the group to drop away and allow him—or Sonny Fortune or Pete Cosey or whoever—to solo briefly, like Wile E. Coyote after running off a cliff, legs pinwheeling madly in the air before the ground came rushing back up again to meet him. This was also why he sometimes put down the horn and walked over to the organ, releasing dissonant one-chord blasts by leaning on the keys with one finger or, if he was in a really pissy mood that night, his elbow.

That was a sound that was unmistakable; it said, certainly better than he could with his rasp of a voice, "Here I am. I'm still in charge here."

There were plenty of occasions, of course, when Miles *wanted* to be just one more piece of the puzzle. In the mid-1970s, his playing became much more intensely rhythmic than it had ever been before. He said as much in his autobiography, commenting about the 1973–75 band that they "settled down into a deep African thing, a deep African-American groove, with a lot of emphasis on rhythm, and not on individual solos." Percy Heath, a collaborator in the 1950s, said around this time that Miles wasn't playing music anymore—that he was only playing rhythm. And indeed, there were plenty of moments, with the live band, that Davis was doing exactly that. He stabbed at the darkness, yes, but he did it right on Al Foster's massive downbeats. His phrases were tighter than they seemed; he might spin a long, discursive stream of notes, but they came in and went back out dead on the one, punching through the air like an awl through leather, perfectly spaced. Jab. Jab. Jab. The notes came right where they were needed, never stepping on someone else's thing as in free jazz, and sometimes even trading off, call-and-response style, with Liebman or Fortune.

Miles had never done much of this. During his acoustic years, he was always about letting each player solo in turn, never "trading fours" in the hard-bop manner. To hear him become one with the band in such a radically egalitarian way must have been almost as shocking as hearing him play through a wah-wah pedal and a stack of amplifiers.

This isn't to suggest that Davis abandoned everything that had come before. Rather, he incorporated what he'd been playing for decades into this new, loud, polyrhythmic and yes, funky context. Jazz was all about dynamics, and that stayed with him after he plugged in. His trumpet playing continued to display its roots in the blues and, to a lesser extent, bebop, and he placed that in direct contrast with the jagged funk the band was creating.

Another crucial tool was volume. As Miles himself said, when you push a trumpet through electronics, if you're not careful, it can turn into sonic mud, like mixing paint too much until it's all brown. This caused him to play shorter, punchier phrases when the band was in full roar. The more intricate lines discussed above were mostly reserved for unaccompanied solo spots. Thus, he was able to retain a piercing clarity at all times—sound systems permitting.

The band had major problems with sound in venues throughout these years. When they were playing arenas, their roaring, shifting pieces were fully accommodated by the walls of amplifiers. If they could handle Ted Nugent, Led Zeppelin, and Black Sabbath, major concert halls could certainly work with Miles Davis, no matter how loud he cranked it up. But in theaters, particularly in New York, clarity was very much an issue.

Dark Magus is the perfect example of this. Impressive as it is, it's hard to figure out why Miles chose to release that particular concert. Not only was he auditioning two new bandmembers that night, with fifty-fifty results, he was also attempting to push the massive volume of his septet through the jazz- and classical-oriented sound system of New York's Carnegie Hall. The sound spreads out all over as a result, turning into something very much like a mudslide.

The player who suffers the most in the *Dark Magus* soundmix is Michael Henderson, who's barely audible throughout much of the first half of the album. His bass disappears almost totally into the guitars, melding with Reggie Lucas's chording. This makes the whole group sound very full, but compared to *Agharta*, where one can listen to individual instruments and thus really hear what the band was about in terms of on-the-fly and in-the-groove interplay, *Dark Magus* is disappointing. Only in the slower, more stripped-down tracks at the end of Disc One and the beginning of Disc Two can you really start to pick players out and follow them through the pieces.

All that being said, it's Miles's heaviest album by far, and it establishes a clear connection between what he was doing in 1974 and what George Clinton was doing that same year, on Funkadelic's *Standing on the Verge of Getting It On*. It's always been my go-to Davis disc when I just want to be shoved back in my chair by force. The few moments of subtle instrumental interplay and soloing that gleam out of the vast edifice that is the album are thus that much more valuable. Hearing someone play a really beautiful phrase on *Dark Magus* is like finding a diamond shard wedged into the mortar of a cinder-block wall.

Miles was able to become more of a member of the ensemble during these years, rather than a full-time leader, because he had other players capable of taking the lead. The most obvious of these was guitarist Pete Cosey. On *Pangaea*, this becomes very clear. The double CD documents an evening concert from February 1, 1975. Earlier that day, Davis and the band had played another concert, which was released on *Agharta*. This earlier show must have tired Miles out, because on *Pangaea*, he plays a lot less. It's excusable; he was forty-eight at the time, after all—not the best age to be responsible for nearly four hours of music in a single day. For most of the first set, a medley of trademark riffs—the one known as "Moja," which also opens *Dark Magus*, and another called "Tune in 5"—and another never-recorded tune, "Zimbabwe," Davis is absent from the proceedings. He takes a couple of brief solos, spilling notes out of his horn almost haphazardly, like he hasn't quite got the energy to shape his lines. For about thirty of the nearly forty-two minutes, though, the stage belongs to the band, and they make the most of it, Cosey more than anybody else.

In 1974, Dave Liebman left the band and was replaced by Sonny Fortune. (Azar Lawrence, who can be heard auditioning live on the second disc of *Dark Magus*, was not offered the position.) This transition was fundamental and symbolic at the same time. Liebman was the last white member of the band. Miles was always famous for striking a racial balance in his bands, sometimes using players who had an overtly "white" or intellectualized style, like pianist Bill Evans, to counteract the heavy-handed groove moves the (black) rest of the band might otherwise pursue. This contrast is at the heart of *Kind of Blue*, the album many critics and fans regard as Davis's masterpiece.

Dave Liebman's saxophone didn't serve exactly the same purpose, but his style was very different from Fortune's. His lines were longer and more discursive. Fortune preferred a choppy, post-R&B attack, and also switched instruments more often than his predecessor, playing flute on much of *Pangaea*. (Liebman played flute only on "Calypso Frelimo" and "He Loved Him Madly," not on any of the live tapes I've heard.)

Trading Fortune for Liebman, who went on to form the fusion band Lookout Farm, seems like part of an overt racial strategy on Miles's part. At this time, the band was opening shows for Herbie Hancock, and playing concerts in major cities which, according to its members, attracted sizable numbers of black fans. Their equipment was painted red, black, and green, the colors of the Black Power movement. The four tracks on *Dark Magus* were named "Moja," "Wili," "Tatu," and "Nne"—the numbers one through four in Swahili. Similarly, the two albums *Agharta* and *Pangaea* are named for, respectively, a mythical city at the center of the earth and the gigantic land mass that later split to form the present-day continents.

Clearly, Miles was attempting, in these years, to combine the one-world music he was making, with its combinations of African rhythms, rock, jazz, and funk, with the stylistic accoutrements of then-trendy black rhetoric. It wasn't much different from the leather Africa medallions of so-called "conscious" hip-hop groups like the Jungle Brothers, A Tribe Called Quest, and De La Soul in the late 1980s. Certainly it didn't indicate anything about Miles's own attitudes on race, which were well known by then. He was too radical an individualist to attach himself to anything so prosaic as a political movement. It may have been a sign of his younger bandmembers' politics. But it was inevitably associated with Davis—and coming, therefore, from a cultural figure of his long standing, someone whose public identity many had probably assumed was more or less fixed, it was more shocking than it was coming from younger and presumably more insurgency-minded performers.

The mystical-political attitudes and symbolism of the live records were not matched on the studio albums *Big Fun* and *Get Up With It*. In fact, the

schism between live and studio Miles was nearly as wide in 1974 as in 1969. The road band of 1969 was a tight quintet; the albums were created using a platoon of organists and percussionists—plus John McLaughlin. Similarly, the 1974–75 septet/octet was not always heard on the studio records. A lot of this was because *Big Fun* and *Get Up With It* were compilations of material from between 1970 and 1974. Seven sessions were required to gather the eight tracks on *Get Up With It*. (Only "Mtume" and "Maiysha" were recorded on the same day.) Similarly, the four tracks on *Big Fun* were produced on separate dates—two in 1969, and one each in 1970 and 1972. Miles clearly felt that the real action was onstage during these years.

The move from fully structured compositions to a single mass of music, demarcated by recognizable riffs, is why Miles's studio albums from this period are the way they are. A studio recording of "Moja," from *Dark Magus*, or "Agharta Prelude" would surely have been disappointing. (The somewhat anemic version of the latter track, incorporated into one of the four lengthy medleys on *Panthalassa*, indicates just how disappointing.) That's why *Get Up With It* and *Big Fun* are so radically different from *Dark Magus*, *Agharta*, and *Pangaea*: Miles was using the studio as a venue for experimentation during these years. Lineups changed from session to session, and new technologies were tried out, resulting in tracks like "He Loved Him Madly" and "Rated X," among others.

It's also important to recall that despite his newfound affinity for studio experimentation, Miles was still very much a jazz player in his approach to recording. Go in, lay it down, give it to Teo. Get back out there and really play. Throughout the history of jazz, musicians have asserted that the studio stiffens them up, that it's only onstage, in front of an audience, that they can really stretch out on a tune and explore its full potential.

Compositions like "Maiysha" were taped shortly after being written. Miles would assemble a group in Columbia's 52nd Street studio, with Teo in the booth, and hand them a snatch of music, or just play something on the keyboard and murmur a bassline to Michael Henderson. They'd run through it and go home. Davis would leave the rest up to Macero and begin booking the next series of concerts. Only then, when the new composition began insinuating itself into the live sets, would it expand and bloom into what it had been all along. The version of "Maiysha" on *Get Up With It*, while nice, feels at times like a confused attempt at a Latin dance number. When the tune reappears on *Agharta*, though, it's a funk-rock monster jam, with the Latin rhythm patterns accentuating the ferocity of the main riff, in the vein of early-seventies Santana albums like *Lotus* or *Welcome*.

"Mtume" is never heard live. There are solid reasons for that. "Mtume" is driven by a pounding rhythm (no surprise that it's named for the band's percussionist), but it's not the hard-rock bash of what the group was play-

ing in concert then. To incorporate it would have required a wholesale rhythmic shift, just as playing "Rated X" or something from *On the Corner* would have done. "Ife," a piece often played during these years, doesn't demand as dramatic a change of course. All the band has to do is burrow into its deep groove. It's actually harder to switch from one fast rhythm to another than to slow down.

"Mtume" is a pretty fascinating track, though, and would have added something to the live set. The congas can be heard quite loudly in the left-hand speaker throughout the piece. On the far right, answering them, is a cowbell. Maybe one or the other was added in post-production, since Al Foster is quite busy behind the drum kit. It's possible, though, that Pete Cosey is playing it. There's some confusion about the personnel on "Mtume." In his book *Miles Beyond*, Paul Tingen lists Dominique Gaumont as being present. That wouldn't be a surprise, as he's there for "Maiysha," recorded the same day. But he's not credited in the CD booklet. It certainly *sounds* like there are three guitarists playing, particularly when Pete Cosey solos.

Periodically Miles inserts jagged blasts of organ, signaling the band to shift from the funky, repetitive riff they're playing to one more rooted in boogieing blues, rather reminiscent of "Right Off." The main riff is better, though. Gaumont (presumably) leads, and Reggie Lucas vamps almost in the background. He's barely audible, while Gaumont, if that's him and not an overdubbed Cosey, is loud and up-front, so much so that his guitar is often distorted, as is Michael Henderson's bass. In fact, the two lock in, and interact, amid so much fuzz that at times it's like listening to a Can bootleg from the same time period.

Miles's trumpet solo is distorted too, and fed through the wah-wah pedal. The combination is both unsettling and ugly: He sounds like he's playing into a subway intercom. Interestingly, though, Gaumont (or Cosey) changes riffs while his boss is soloing, moving to the far right of the sonic field (Lucas stays on the far left) and doing a sort of call-and-response with Davis. Every time the trumpet emits a short phrase, the guitarist answers it with a bluesy spurt of notes. Eventually, this right-hand guitarist is back to playing the piece's main riff, while Miles heads into the stratosphere, blowing with more power than he shows anywhere else on *Get Up With It*. He almost abandons the needle-like jabbing of the live records for the fierce screams he'd mustered so regularly in 1969 and 1970.

Pete Cosey's solo on "Mtume" is tucked way into the background, for reasons known only to the band and Teo Macero. It's not particularly wild, compared to some of his other contemporaneous work; it sounds a lot like what John McLaughlin played on "Go Ahead John," four years earlier. Perhaps placing Cosey so far down in the mix was Davis's attempt to make "Mtume," which appeared on Side Four of *Get Up With It*, work as a counterpart to

"Rated X," from Side Two. The grooves are similar, and the two pieces mirror each other in the way the rhythm section (Lucas, Henderson, Foster, and Mtume, plus Badal Roy on the latter track) dominates the mix.

Juxtapositions like this—and like the pairing of the mammoth tracks "He Loved Him Madly" and "Calypso Frelimo"—indicate clearly that although *Big Fun* may well have been a cash-in effort, to which Miles felt little allegiance, *Get Up With It* was quite obviously an album assembled with some care. It seems intended to sum up, in one go, all of the ideas Davis had had since recording *On the Corner*. It documented his increased mastery of the studio, the ability of his new bandmembers to alter their styles to fit different moods and grooves, and his commitment to hardcore experimentalism, even as he was kicking out the jams live. At the same time, though, it was a series of snapshots, caught whenever there was a hole in the touring schedule.

In 1974, Davis gave an interview to Sy Johnson for *Jazz Magazine*. He said of *Big Fun*, "I'll be tired of *this* music before today is over. *That's* four years old." The "this" to which he referred was "He Loved Him Madly," which had been recorded that morning. There's plenty of bravado in that statement, but there's also a core of truth. At this point, Miles was reaching the pinnacle of an ascent that had begun nearly seven years earlier. He was creating at such a prodigious rate that there literally was no time to linger over a single piece of work, however impressive. As soon as it was done, it was time to move on to the next thing.

But what could have been the next thing, after what was achieved in 1974 and 1975? Where could Miles have gone, had he not vanished? It's hard to even try to imagine the next step after *Agharta*, when so many people haven't even dealt with *that* music yet. There's been some reassessment of the mid-1970s material, most notably by Greg Tate in *Down Beat* in the mid-1980s, and later in his book *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*. In the late 1990s, when many of Miles's live double albums (*At Fillmore*, *Black Beauty*, *In Concert*) were reissued, positive reviews appeared, but they were mostly from the rock press.

When the music was actually being made, though, many critics were extremely, well, critical. In 1976, Lester Bangs wrote,

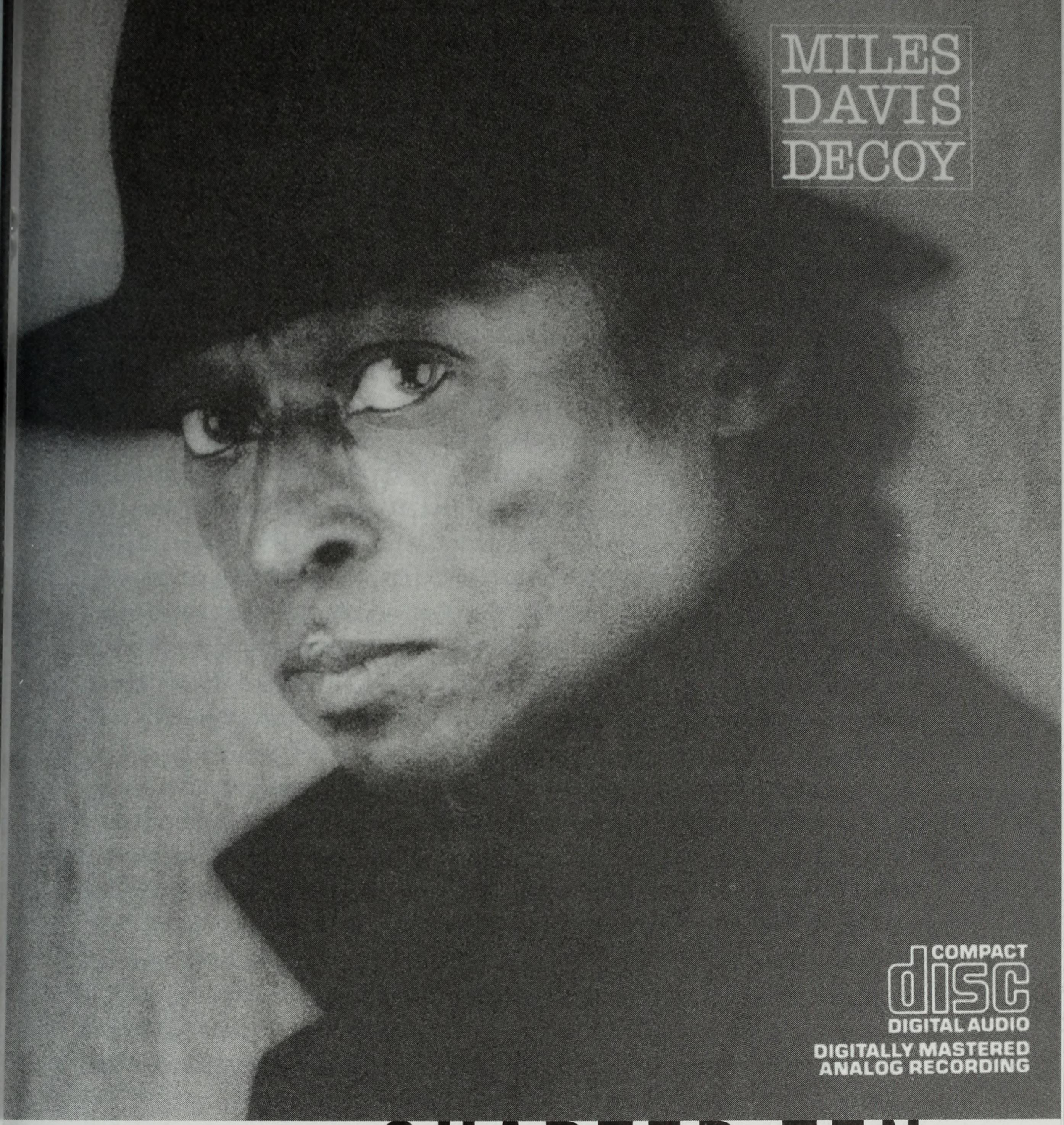
> *. . . the one time I finally got a chance to see him live, in 1973, he was such an asshole that his cooking (and, of course, unidentified) backup band put him to shame, while the titan himself settled for stalking sullenly around the stage, pausing his premature curmudgeon's sulk every few minutes to lift his horn and blow three to six random careless and totally irrelevant notes, or to find himself wandering behind an electric organ on which he randomly essayed two-finger off-notes more suited to*

in-store demonstration than what was going on around him. The highlight of the concert was when some smart-aleck in the audience threw a Frisbee, it hit him in his black badass dog-mean S&M choker, which fell off. His entire performance, from music to personal bearing, was a giant fuck-you to everybody present (including his fellow musicians?) and I hated his guts. If you wanted to rationalize this shit academically you could see it as the logical extension of his legendary proclivity for turning his back on his audiences, except that when he used to do that he was playing music that could snap your soul in two at the same time, besides which it's a matter of simple convenience (after all, why should we extend him any courtesy?) to reject all such notions which can only encourage more infantilism, and merely write the guy off as an asshole. And quite possibly a burnt-out one at that.

On the other hand, in 1991, Greg Tate wrote,

As in the '50s and '60s, in the '70s he emerged as chief prophet of musicality for the next 20 years. Punk, hip-hop, house, new jack swing, worldbeat, ambient music, and dub are all presaged in the records Miles cut between 1969 and 1975. There's no other figure whose work can be said to have laid the cornerstone for the advances of Brian Eno, Parliament-Funkadelic, Prince, Public Image Ltd., Talking Heads, Public Enemy, Living Colour, Marshall Jefferson, and Wynton Marsalis.

Both these assessments are accurate. That's why the music Miles Davis made between 1972 and 1975 remains some of the most fascinating, maddening, challenging, and exhilarating ever made, by him or by anyone, in any genre.



CHAPTER TEN

POP LIFE

BY THE EARLY 1980S, ROCK HAD BEEN the dominant form of American music for roughly thirty years. As far as the mass media were concerned, jazz was a cult music, preserved in academic amber and in magazines so hidebound and fusty their pages seemed pre-yellowed. Miles Davis could already see this

situation developing in the late 1960s, and he countered it by creating an outsized public persona. This character of "Miles" would draw the attention of potential listeners in ways that his music alone could not do. What he played between 1969 and 1975 became, with each passing year, *less* commercially palatable than it had been. In order to bring his work to an audience of the size Miles knew it deserved, though, he had to play in the pop industry's territory, and by its rules. He had to become "Miles." It was a straight-up rock-star move, and it worked.

Upon his return from self-imposed exile, Davis found that jazz musicians were still expected to be impassive totems of cool, fueled solely by the desire to further their art. It was a totally anachronistic image, flying in the face of everything that had happened in the rest of American culture since the 1950s. Miles consciously, strenuously rejected that image. He'd already been that guy, in the fifties—it was one of the many identities he'd assumed during his professional life, but why go back to it? He wanted to return as a *star*, not some dour musician-priest proffering jazz like health food.

The second most prominent player in jazz, though, was another trumpeter, and *that* guy was not only willing to play in dapper suits and call jazz "America's classical music," he almost single-handedly spearheaded the rising neoconservative movement. Wynton Marsalis was signed to Columbia, just like Miles, but that was where the similarities ended. The younger man's talent was undeniable, but he was nobody's innovator. He stuck firmly to a hard-bop style that admitted no contemporary influences, and openly criticized Davis in interviews, telling *Jazz Times* magazine, "Miles was never my idol, I resent what he's doing because it gives the whole scene such a let-down . . .. I think Bird would roll over in his grave if he knew what was going on . . ."

Miles, on the other hand, knew the score. As he said in an interview with the UK fashion magazine *The Face*,

> *Some people, whatever is happening now, either they can't handle it or they don't want to know. They'll be messed up on that bogus "nostalgia" thing. Nostalgia, shit! That's a pitiful concept. Because it's dead, it's safe—that's what that shit is about! Hell, no one wanted to hear us when we were playing jazz. Those days with Bird, Diz, Trane—some were good, some were miserable. . . . People didn't like that stuff then. Hell, why do you think we were playing clubs? No one wanted us on prime-time TV.*

Thus, when he returned, Davis took the opportunities America's (and the world's) fame-crazed culture afforded anyone of prominence. He did

a TV commercial, pitching Honda scooters in that legendary rasping voice. (Miles wasn't the only edgy figure to cash Honda's checks that year—Devo and Lou Reed appeared in the same series of ads.) He acted in guest spots on *Miami Vice* and *Crime Story*. He was a musical guest on *Saturday Night Live* and *Night Music*. He hosted music videos on VH-1. He made his own video, for "Tutu," directed by Spike Lee. Like rock stars John Lennon and David Bowie, among others, he exhibited and sold his paintings. And on and on. In the eighties, Miles made the conscious decision to become a star.

Sometimes, Miles didn't even have to be physically present to have his iconic status reinforced by the mass media. I remember watching an episode of *The Cosby Show* in about 1985, when it was the most popular show in America. Bill Cosby walked into his TV son Theo's bedroom to discuss whatever teen trauma would be humorously worked out that week, and there on the wall was Miles Davis.

The set representing "Theo Huxtable's bedroom" featured a gigantic poster of Miles—the same black-and-white photograph that adorns the cover of his 1984 album *Decoy*. He's standing in profile, wearing a trench coat and hat, holding his trumpet and staring straight into the camera. (Similar shots were used on the covers of Miles's own autobiography and Jack Chambers's *Milestones*.)

In 1985, no other sitcom would have decorated the set with a picture of a jazz musician. Executive producer Cosby's well-documented love of the music was surely a factor, but Davis's own celebrity made it a gesture not of charity, but of acknowledgement. It was *legitimate* that a middle-class black teenager would know who Miles Davis was. Still, it surprised me to see something I considered a secret pleasure (I knew more people, in those days, who listened to Black Flag than to Miles Davis) made about as public as could be.

White America doesn't totally trust or embrace black people, but it loves black entertainers, whether they play the trumpet or shoot three-pointers. And in America, becoming famous and successful can bring with it a kind of racial transcendence. Stars from Oprah Winfrey and Michael Jordan to Halle Berry and Will Smith have, in many ways, left blackness behind, moving into the rarefied realm of cultural omnipotence. But this phenomenon has no impact on, or connection to, the economic or social status of American blacks as a group. It's a mediated condition, rooted entirely in celebrity.

This happened to Miles too, and he wasn't entirely comfortable with it. He'd felt appreciated for his art as a younger man, when he'd traveled to Europe in the 1950s. That "freedom of being . . . treated like a human being,

like someone important," as he put it in his autobiography, was a good feeling. But then he'd returned to America, and put up with three decades in the trenches of native racism. And anyway, the blind adoration America affords its celebrities, once they're anointed, isn't the same thing as appreciating art. Miles surely understood that. But if that was the path to enjoying the life he knew he deserved, he'd take it.

More ironically perhaps, Miles's 1980s image was, to a large degree, that of an elder statesman. This was something he'd battled fiercely in earlier decades. It carried the implication of creative slowdown, the same way a Lifetime Achievement award is often seen as a going-away present. In the 1960s, and particularly the 1970s, Miles had made a number of moves, the hiring of bandmembers half his age and the updating of his wardrobe among them, with an eye toward defying time, staying young at heart, and remaining in tune with the latest thing, whatever it was. In the 1980s, he worked harder than ever at this; his music flirted with, and even emulated, contemporaneous pop much more than in prior decades. Still, his genius brought him once again into a sphere all his own. Unsatisfied with being a jazz elder, the Miles Davis of the 1980s was truly *sui generis*.

This isolationism, tinged with an awareness of pop, was emblematic of Miles's whole nature. He had no interest in countering ignorance by educating anyone about race, music, or anything else. He wanted to succeed—artistically and financially—and to make certain that his appearance signaled that success. It was simple: If he was in the world's face as a rich, famous, artistically significant black man, then the existence of rich, famous, artistically significant black men could not be denied. Most of the time, the strategy worked. But not always.

In 1987, Miles went to the Kennedy Center as a guest of Cicely Tyson. Ray Charles was being honored, among others. From the moment a limousine picked the pair up at the airport, the evening was a parade of humiliating and infuriating episodes—encounters with old, wealthy, privileged white people who had little or no knowledge of Miles or his accomplishments. It only made matters worse that Davis was dressed in a manner extravagant even for him. He wore an ensemble by the Japanese designer Kohshin Satoh—a black jacket with tails and a red snake, trimmed in white sequins, coursing down its back; two vests, one red and one white with silver chains; and shiny black leather pants.

Not surprisingly, he was looked at askance not only by the tuxedoed potentates with whom he shared a dinner table, but even by the waitstaff. It didn't take long before he'd gotten into an argument with an elderly white woman, and hissed to Tyson that he wanted out of the event, right away if not sooner. In his autobiography, he wrote,

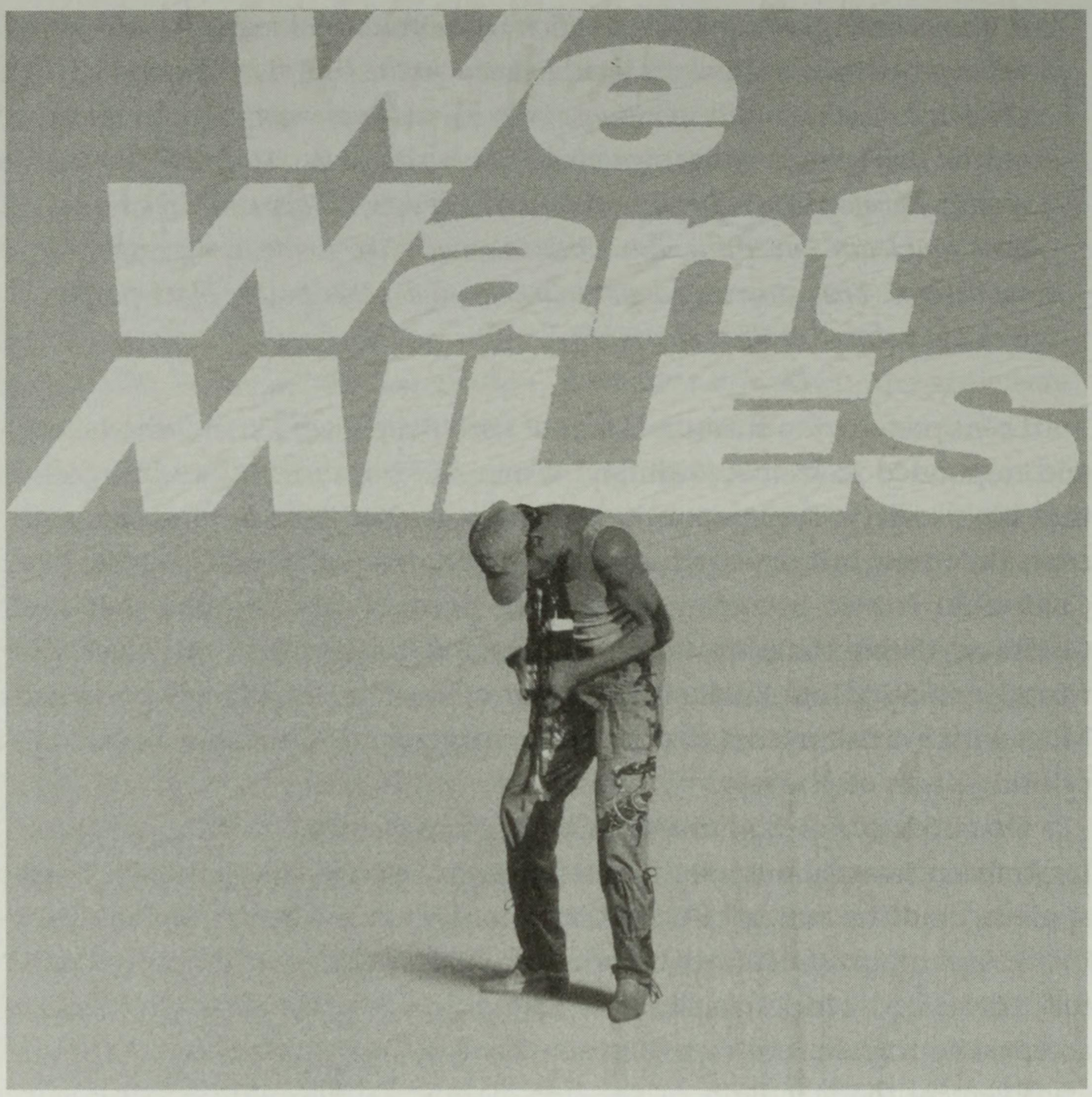
It was sickening to be put in a position where you've got to teach dumbass white people who really don't want to know in the first place, but feel obligated to ask . . . silly questions. Why should some motherfucker make me feel bad because of their ignorance? They can go to a store and buy a record of people they're honoring and inviting down. They could read a book and learn something. But that's too much like giving us the respect we deserve. They stay stupid and make me and a lot of other black people feel bad because of their ignorance.

Davis preferred to surround himself with people who knew who he was and responded to him accordingly. When she wasn't trying to bring him into high society, Tyson could occasionally get her head around this concept. She threw him a sixtieth birthday party on a yacht in Marina del Rey, California. It was attended by Quincy Jones, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, Herbie Hancock, and numerous other celebrities both black and white, including Tom Bradley, the mayor of Los Angeles. Bradley presented Miles with a citation from the city at the party, and *Jet* magazine covered it, printing pages of photos.

On another occasion, Miles and band played a huge, multi-artist concert for Amnesty International, at the Meadowlands Arena in New Jersey. He'd also appeared on "The Struggle Continues," a track from the benefit album *Artists United Against Apartheid*. After his brief set, Davis was greeted almost worshipfully backstage by rock stars like Bono, Sting, and Peter Gabriel—accolades he accepted with grace, knowing they were his due, and nothing less.

Even by the standards of the mid-eighties, Miles's clothing was outlandish, more like something one might see in a movie than on the streets. Shimmering fabrics, endlessly pleated jackets, billowing pants . . . it was androgynous and bizarre, not in the least "cool" in the way he'd always been before. Even at his most tricked-out moments in the 1970s, he'd always had one foot in the gutter, giving ghetto blacks someone to emulate, stylistically speaking. But in the 1980s, he became almost a science-fiction cartoon. Years before MC Hammer, Miles wore pants with pockets big enough to hold his Harmon mute. His jackets were red or gold, or some combination of incredibly bright colors, and they flowed down his body like robes. The body-hugging fit of his 1950s and 1960s suits was long gone.

It's not a dismissal of the music he was playing to note that it often matched the outfits he wore to play it. Look at the outfit he sports on the cover of 1981's *We Want Miles*; a tank top (also known, and here the irony gets a little bitter, as a "wife-beater"), mock-military zippered pants, and a cap. He's dressed for a summer afternoon on a Harlem sidewalk, and that's exactly how the music sounds: It's tight street funk, built on a foundation



of hard beats and popping bass, with proto-metal guitar shrieking and whamming around the edges. It should be booming from a Jeep. This was his image in 1983 too, when he released *Star People*, the bluesiest of his 1980s albums.

On *Decoy*, the image had changed, but it still matched the sounds. The album's black-and-white, trench-coated cover inspires thoughts of *film noir*, and the music, while funky, also has a smokiness and uncertainty to it that's, at its best, a little bit ominous and off-putting. The cybertronic tracks that seem to serve as interludes between the "real" pieces only heighten the mood of tension and watchfulness. Miles looks out from that cover like he's going to slap your hand back as you reach for the record in the store, and the music reflects that same fundamental distrust of humanity, even if it *is* beautiful, lyrical, and funky.

The cover of 1985's *You're Under Arrest* seems like the logical next step after its predecessor. Miles is wearing the same hat, or a very similar one.

The photo is color instead of black and white, though, with Davis standing against a bright red backdrop. He's wearing a black bullfighter-style jacket, and holding a small, almost dainty gun. He reminds me of William Burroughs, another old man who publicized his fascination with firearms. The album contains two of Miles's most famous tunes, his versions of Michael Jackson's "Human Nature" and Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time," and the record looks more like contemporary R&B than jazz.

Miles wouldn't show much of his wardrobe on an album cover again until 1991, when *Doo-Bop*, a posthumous release, featured a shot of him reclining in bed, shirtless and wearing the by-then-expected billowing pants, holding his red trumpet. *Tutu* was sold using only a close-up of his face, and *Amandla* featured one of his paintings on its cover. By 1986, when he moved from Columbia to Warner Bros., his iconic status was such that only the face was necessary. The eyes, staring straight ahead at the buyer, said it all.

For four decades, Miles had been the surliest man in show business—stepping to the microphone, playing a solo, then vanishing from the bandstand as his sidemen took *their* solos. His trick of turning his back on the audience (so he could watch, and hear, and interact with the band) was infamous. But in the eighties, his concerts changed a lot.

Miles now complemented his flowing, robe-like clothes, in their bright colors, by playing a gleaming, red trumpet. His sets had started to get longer in the late sixties, once he moved out of jazz clubs and into concert halls. By the eighties, he was playing for nearly two hours a night, and sticking around the whole time. He stalked the boards like a shark, the horn pointed straight down at the floor, playing through a wireless microphone. This wasn't entirely by choice. Because of ill health, Miles needed to keep moving. Underneath the extravagant fashions was, more often than not, a corset and a rubber truss. These compressed his abdominal muscles, allowing him to hit the high notes that were an increasingly prominent feature of his eighties concerts. (This, too, was new; as a young player, Miles had been slagged off as "a trumpet player who could play only in the middle register and fluffed half his notes." Beginning in the late 1960s, he began to play much harder and more forcefully, and by the mid-1980s, was regularly rocketing into the upper registers of the horn.)

When he wasn't soloing, the new Miles hovered around his bandmembers. He'd lead saxophonist Bill Evans to the keyboard for a solo, or lean on guitarist Mike Stern's shoulder, whispering encouragement to him. He'd play from the drum riser, or hold up signs bearing bandmembers' names as they took their turns in the spotlight. Sometimes, he'd even stick his tongue out at the audience. Furthermore, the new tunes were discrete, offering pauses for applause in a way Davis hadn't done in years. Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, his concerts had been solid,

uninterrupted blocks of music—now, he was acknowledging the fans in every way short of stepping to the proscenium and passing out sweat-soaked scarves like Elvis. It might have been obvious showbiz hokum, but the increasingly sizable crowds loved it.

This was the behavior of a man who'd grown comfortable with being a serious musician, a vital and constantly creative artist, *and* a pop star. Not everyone admired Miles for these changes, of course; in an infamous *New Republic* essay, "Play the Right Thing," conservative critic Stanley Crouch castigated Davis for these actions, while pummeling him with equal force over the hostility and surliness that his newer stage attitudes had supplanted.

I didn't learn about the evolution of his behavior and persona until years later. The mid-eighties Miles, Miles the star, was the first Miles I ever knew.

It was 1987, and *Rolling Stone* magazine was celebrating its twentieth anniversary. One part of this was the publication of a list of the most important records released during those two decades. Miles had two entries on the list: *Kind of Blue* and *Bitches Brew*. I bought both, within a few weeks of each other. *Kind of Blue*, unsurprisingly, won me over on first listen. *Bitches Brew*, on the other hand, was a murky disappointment. It wasn't until I undertook this book that I listened to it again. After everything I'd heard in the intervening years, from Hendrix and Santana to the harshest free jazz and death metal, it made a lot more sense to my ear. I still don't love it, but I understand it a hell of a lot better than I did when I was fifteen.

Even though *Bitches Brew* hadn't worked for me, I wanted to hear more Miles. So I bought his then-most-recent albums, *Tutu* and *You're Under Arrest*. Those were both instantly appealing, *Tutu* in particular. It was an eerie, almost industrial album, the machine beats and pulsing keyboards providing a perfect contrast to the stoic, tightly contained emotion of Miles's horn. *You're Under Arrest* was poppier, and more active and engaged. Both became immediate favorites.

Next, I bought *Agharta* and *Pangaea* and, a month or two later, *On the Corner*. The live records sounded more like the heavy metal that had made up a majority of my listening to that point, but I could also hear things that sounded like the noisy hip-hop of Public Enemy, with whom I'd recently become fascinated. I found myself barely listening to what Miles was playing, fixating instead on Pete Cosey's berserk, unfettered guitar solos and Al Foster's skull-cracking backbeat. I couldn't figure out why other metalheads didn't listen to this stuff.

More than that, though, I couldn't figure out how the musician I saw on the covers of *Tutu* and *You're Under Arrest* had traveled from the acoustic music of the 1950s to the blaring hard rock of the 1970s and then to the electronic rhythms and swooshing synthesizers of the new albums. But it wasn't in my budget to pick up all the albums in between, to feel my way through

the transitional records. I was a teenager, working part-time at an ice-cream store and picking up maybe one cassette a week on payday. (I didn't own a CD player yet. They were newish, prohibitively expensive, and non-portable—the last fact being a deal-breaker to a Walkman addict like myself.)

Eventually, I came to a judgment that affected just about everything I heard after that, by Miles and other musicians: that there didn't necessarily have to be a straight path from one album to the next. It was not only *possible* to hear *Kind of Blue* and *Agharta* as facets of the same person, it didn't make sense to hear them any other way. They *weren't* connected; they existed for themselves, as individual and complete creative statements, not links in a chain. What's more, there was nothing to be gained by hearing the earlier album first. I could have started with *Agharta*, and waited years to hear *Kind of Blue*, and my joy in the music of Miles Davis would have been undiminished.

I've softened this viewpoint somewhat in the years between that initial, adolescent immersion in Miles and the writing of this book. The availability of rare live recordings, alternate takes, and other things has made the task of tracing the stages of his creative progress relatively easy. In the CD age, practically all recorded music exists in pristine digital simultaneity. One can listen to Louis Armstrong not as the root of all jazz, but as one more trumpet player to take or leave depending on personal taste. But at the same time, the exhaustive reissuing and archive-emptying that is the major label approach to jazz makes it a simple (if expensive) task to listen to Miles in chronological order, to hear the emergence, testing and abandonment of instrumentation, concepts, studio techniques. Both approaches are equally valid.

Greg Tate has written extensively, and eloquently, about what Miles Davis meant to young black men in the late 1960s and early 1970s. My experience of Miles was completely different from his, though, and I think this was as much a function of time as of race.

The 1980s was the perfect time for a suburban white teenage boy's initial encounter with Miles Davis. As he became a mass-media figure, a lot of his edge, the factor that had intimidated audiences, critics, and fellow musicians for decades, faded away. In performance, he was a showman, and almost friendly—close, despite his own statements to the contrary, quoted in Chapter One, to the territory mined by Louis Armstrong. (It's worth noting, briefly, that the role of Jazz Ambassador to the World often falls to trumpeters. First there was Armstrong, then Dizzy Gillespie, then Miles, then Wynton Marsalis. Saxophonists are often imagined to be the spiritual heart of the music, but trumpeters are its public face.) Offstage, Miles became a relatively placid, basically cooperative celebrity, granting interviews with a frequency that startled longtime observers, and generally being a star.

It was easy to be down with that Miles. He was hip, but not alienating in the way a new generation of black celebrities were becoming. The rise of hip-hop brought an unprecedented black anger to pop culture. Almost all performing artists of the hip-hop generation, including actors and comedians as well as rappers, were selling surliness and an inchoate hostility that is by now the dominant face of black culture—so much so that performers who go in the opposite direction aren't called Uncle Toms (the term is out of vogue) but are certainly seen that way. Think of how Eddie Murphy was seen in the 1980s versus how Cuba Gooding Jr. is seen today.

In this burgeoning atmosphere of staged black rage, it was perfectly okay, if surprising, for my mother to see me listening to Miles Davis. Indeed, the class connotations of jazz made it better than okay; it was a decidedly positive thing, certainly preferable to the Judas Priest and Motörhead records that made up a substantial part of my listening then, and still do.

Music invites a degree of identification with the artist that is unmatched in any other medium. When we watch a play or a movie, we follow the plot and empathize with the characters, but we are always aware of the drama as self-contained and external to ourselves. This is why attempts to "break the fourth wall," like those by the Living Theater or Artaud's Theater of the Absurd, frequently wind up making some members of the audience feel a little embarrassed for the performers.

By contrast, when we watch a musician play live, we project ourselves into that. Because music is creativity channeled through mechanics—because the playing of an instrument is a physical task, a skill that can be learned—the audience member will often imagine himself participating, or aspire to participation.

This identification is more common in rock than in jazz. Jazz actively cultivates an image and aura of intellectualism. Even its most raucous, groove-oriented forms still try to keep the gutbucket churn of R&B at arm's length. The musicians like it that way. Since jazz gave up its role as dance music, sometime around World War II, it's been as emotional and beautiful as at any time in its history and evolution, but much of the physicality has gone out of it.

Even the hardest-swinging rhythm players around don't often muster their gifts in the service of moving the crowd. They're catering to a head-nodding, goatee-stroking audience. And without the physical element, it's hard to project oneself into a musical performance. This is why so much European-style free improvisation leaves the vast majority of music listeners cold. There's nothing to it but dry and dispassionate brainpower.

In the 1980s, Miles was a musician a listener could identify with. He had a strong image, with his restless onstage presence and semi-outlandish

wardrobe; his band kicked out hard-funk songs with melodies and choruses; and he made showbizzy gestures of inclusion part of the act. All this was at least in part an effort to get himself across to as many people as possible—without ever changing the music into anything he didn't want it to be.

I wasn't all that concerned with using Miles's music as a tool to shape my identity, though. I think there's a fundamental difference in the way white and black teenagers approach issues of style, demeanor, and deportment. Black American kids construct identities as a reaction to, and an armor against, the still mostly white world. White American kids are more comfortable in that world and take that comfort for granted. Thus, they find identities that allow them to rebel, to disrupt that complacency. Black rebellion is (sometimes honestly, sometimes only in the minds of angry teens) a counter to perceived injustice. White rebellion is a counter to life being too easy: They create conflict where there would otherwise be none. But there's always an escape hatch; a white youth, unless he becomes a criminal, can always take off his gear and, in George Thorogood's phrase, get a haircut and get a real job.

This attitude was more suited to the Miles of the 1970s, though. The "safer," "friendlier" Miles Davis of the 1980s didn't provide the transgressive frisson he had before. Playing songs identified with pop acts only served to signal that he wanted to be liked, that he wanted to give people what they wanted. (I don't think this is true, but I'll talk more about that in the two chapters after this one.) The Davis of 1974–75 was alienating, a spacey, hostile presence disguising his voice through a wah-wah pedal and crushing the audience under a hundred tons of avant-acid-metal guitar and brutal funk-rock rhythms, for an hour or two at a stretch. This was something black youth could latch onto, and they did. Miles was a totem of angry cool, of arrogant self-awareness as a virtue and a way of defining blackness.

In the eighties, by contrast, Miles seemed to have evolved past Blackness into mere blackness. Comfortable in his social position and his financial bracket, and embraced for his art, he was finally as close as he ever got to being content.

Eventually, of course, restlessness set in, and it couldn't entirely be exorcised onstage, despite the levels of excitement he was routinely reaching in concert. So in 1989, Miles published his autobiography, co-written with poet Quincy Troupe, and all hell broke loose.

Miles the book was a profanity-laced, unsparing look back at every aspect of Davis's life. He recalled his childhood and early confrontations with racism. He discussed, and in the process demythologized, the bebop scene of 1940s New York, when he'd made his name playing with Charlie Parker. Bird, in fact, was treated with a mixture of love and venom that's

startling, even on third or fourth reading. Some of the stories Davis told about Parker's drug habit and abuse of women (the book is awash in woman-beating, by Miles and others) were enough to make any jazz fan blanch.

The autobiography wasn't entirely negative, of course, though it was portrayed that way by some reviewers, including Stanley Crouch and Greg Tate. Miles had a lot to say about the music of players he admired, even as he criticized them for failings in their personal lives. And his descriptions of his own albums, while occasionally self-aggrandizing, always seemed to make space for praise of his bandmembers.

For the most part, the book successfully captured the tone of a transcribed monologue. A few crudely written passages were obviously Troupe's contributions, bridging gaps between sections dictated by Miles. This only served to make the clearly Davis-narrated material feel that much more vivid.

Canadian writer Jack Chambers accused Davis and Troupe of plagiarizing certain passages dealing with Miles's early years from his book *Milestones*, which had been published a few years earlier. There *are* strong similarities, but no formal acknowledgement ever came. Chambers wrote a lengthy disquisition on the issue in the preface to a revised edition of *Milestones*.

It's reasonable for everybody else to leave it at that. The facts of a man's life are the facts (dates, places, etc.), so if descriptive phrasing is borrowed, it's of minimal concern. Stealing someone's theories is entirely worse than duplicating his descriptions of actual events, particularly events that have been documented elsewhere.

The controversy surrounding the book went a long way toward giving Miles back some of the edge he lost as his music became more melodic, groove-oriented, and audience-friendly. He proved that he could still bite people's heads off, could still live up to his Prince of Darkness image, even if he did end the book talking about how happy he was, how creative, how fulfilled and ready to face the future.

As Greg Tate wrote in his 1983 *Down Beat* essay "The Electric Miles,"

> *. . . I'll admit to being unable to take Miles's comeback seriously. Not that I'm alone in this mind you: I don't think Miles does either. . . . The Return of Miles Davis has to be understood as one of the goofiest promotional campaigns in the history of hype, to be understood at all. This isn't to say Miles hasn't occasionally pulled off some miraculous music since we've been graced by his presence again. It is to say, however, that when you take a good look at his new packaging imagery . . . well, you can't say it doesn't do Madison Avenue proud. Figure it as a movie treatment and the scenario would run something like so: alleged to be drug-ridden,*

debilitated, and dying of cancer, jazz's legendary Prince of Darkness returns from a six-year sabbatical to triumphantly reveal functional chops and heroic recovery from a painful joint operation. His first act is to release an album sporting the title The Man with the Horn *(just like it was some 1950s film noir flick) and fronting slick cover art that wouldn't be out of place as a* Vogue *cologne advertisement. Next comes marriage to a famous actress, surprisingly cordial and candid interviews in* Ebony *and* People, *followed by pictures in* Jet *that depict the brooding black brujo laughing and shaking hands with fans and tuxedoed-down at bourgeois black affairs where Our Hero almost looks like he was born up in there (which he was, remember). . . . Is he kidding us or what? Hard to tell with a man who admits, as he did to Cheryl Hall, that he's always been a big ham at heart. Nevertheless, for all the ribbing Miles definitely seems a happier, healthier human being than ever before. . . . When Miles first came back, I thought it was with a whimper—but I was wrong: Miles Davis has come back to partay y'all. Laugh with him at your own expense.*

Miles's Hollywood moves provided an interesting sideline to his main career path. He composed soundtrack music for two movies, *Street Smart* and *Siesta*. The latter will be discussed in detail in Chapter Twelve, as it's one of his major post-comeback works. The former, though, was a throwaway.

The band combined members from several Davis groups of the 1980s with other studio musicians. Mike Stern was the guitarist, Adam Holzman and Robert Irving III played keyboards, Felton Crews, Daryl Jones, and Alex Blake played bass, Adam Nussbaum and Vincent Wilburn played drums, Steve Thornton was the percussionist, and Tom Harrell's trumpet, Steve Turre's trombone, and Bob Berg's tenor saxophone filled out the sound. Irving and Holzman composed the music. There wasn't enough for a soundtrack album, but eight minutes of brief melodic cues and noodly solos were slated to appear on the boxed set *The Last Word—The Warner Bros. Years*.

Davis also made a guest appearance on the soundtrack to the Christmas black comedy *Scrooged*, playing an adaptation of "We Three Kings Of Orient Are" with a band featuring bassist Marcus Miller, guitarist Larry Carlton, alto saxophonist David Sanborn, keyboardist Paul Shaffer, and drummer Anton Fig. The group showed up in the actual movie, too—they were seen playing on the street, with Miles in all his glittery glory, as Bill Murray, playing a heartless TV executive, walked by and scornfully told them to get jobs. The track was okay, as jazz versions of Christmas carols go. Miles played with a mute, as he did so often in those days, and the band tried with moderate success to funkify the proceedings.

Two other movie soundtracks found Miles playing something totally different from what he was then doing as a solo artist. For the Dennis Hopper–directed neo-*noir* flick *The Hot Spot*, he was part of a band that featured bluesmen Taj Mahal and John Lee Hooker, slide guitarist Roy Rogers, bassist Tim Drummond, and legendary R&B/soul drummer Earl Palmer. The music, composed by Jack Nitzche, reduced Delta blues to a series of gestures (melodic, rhythmic, tonal), and in the process created something haunting and tantalizing at once. There are no lyrics to the songs, but the disconnected phrases Hooker moans —"Well, well," "that ain't right, that ain't right"—contain the feel of the blues, as if you're hearing snatches of a record, or a performance, and being asked to fill in the blanks, to patch the holes with your own memories of blues records you've heard before. Tom Waits once said his favorite way to hear music was through a broken speaker a block away. The soundtrack to *The Hot Spot* is like listening to Delta blues under exactly those circumstances: It turns the blues into something beyond music, something primeval, transmitted through race memory.

The music for the movie *Dingo* was very different, and less successful. Composed, conducted, and arranged by Michel Legrand, it featured Davis in front of a jazz orchestra playing fast but rhythmically static big-band charts. The worst thing about the music, though, is the Sergio Mendes–like vocals that punctuate the band's vamping. It was much more saccharine, inoffensive, and totally edgeless than anything he'd played since the forties.

Miles's major contribution to *Dingo* wasn't as a musician, it was as an actor. He played "Billy Cross," an aging jazz trumpeter who befriends and influences a young boy. It was something like the romanticized portrayal of the jazz musician as "magical Negro" that Dexter Gordon offered in *Round Midnight*, but Miles wasn't playing quite as explicit a version of himself as the saxophonist had done. It's hard not to wonder why Miles took the part. He probably just found the idea flattering.

Once a musician reaches a certain level of prominence and success, they often pick up a paintbrush. Marty Balin from the Jefferson Airplane did it, Ron Wood of the Rolling Stones did it, David Bowie did it, Jerry Garcia from the Grateful Dead did it. So did Miles.

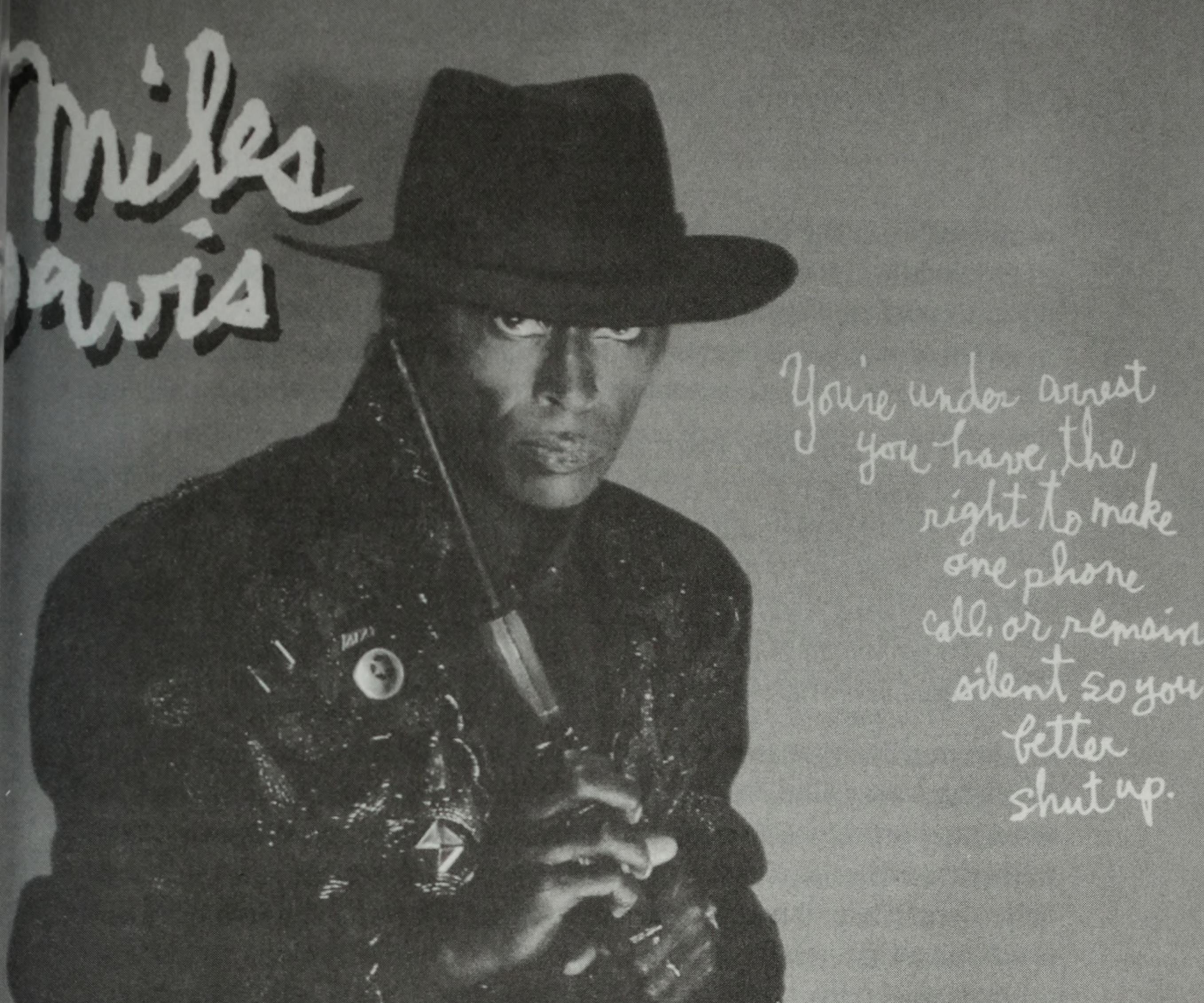
His career as a visual artist began almost as soon as his comeback did. His paintings adorned the covers of *Star People* and *Amandla*, and the inner sleeves of *Decoy*, *Star People*, and *You're Under Arrest* featured his sketches.

Miles's drawings and paintings, semi-abstract and brightly colored, often took music and musicians as their subjects. The illustrations for *Star People* depicted angular figures in earthy shades of brown, yellow, green, and orange, their bodies combining curves and sharp edges, limbs missing or implied. It was as though he was stealing back the African styles of illustration that Picasso had lifted and transformed into one of the roots of Cubism.

The cover of *Amandla* featured a self-portrait, inserted into and combined with a map of Africa. The colors were bright and, again, African-inspired. Miles depicted himself glaring at the buyer from under lowered eyebrows. It was a good pairing with the record's title, which is the Swahili word for "freedom." It wasn't the first time Davis had given an album, or a song, a title that referred in some way to African politics. His previous album, *Tutu*, had been named for the South African bishop at the heart of the anti-apartheid movement, and 1974's "Calypso Frelimo," from *Get Up With It*, was a tribute to the rebels who liberated Mozambique from white rule. Miles didn't settle for painting album covers. More of his canvases were exhibited in Europe and the U.S., and a book of his artwork was published, to positive reviews.

From the time he came blinking into daylight in 1981 to his death a decade later, Miles Davis did everything he could to become a star. He secured a place for himself in American culture that will never be diminished. But I honestly believe that if he hadn't come back—if he'd stayed gone after 1975—he would not have become the towering figure he is. His life required a concluding act.

The first thirty years of his career had been purely musical. As brilliant as that music was, if Miles hadn't returned to the spotlight, Wynton Marsalis would have seized jazz's throne unopposed. And in time, Miles might have been consigned to history as just one more genius musician, like Thelonious Monk or Sonny Rollins or John Coltrane, whose art had little or no impact on American culture outside the jazz ghetto. High culture, whether fine art, classical music, non-musical theater, or jazz, is admired from afar, but it simply doesn't inspire passion across the spectrum of American life. Miles may have considered this to be a very real possibility, and refused to let it be his fate. He came back to make sure he wouldn't ever be forgotten. And he succeeded.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

NEW BLUES (1981–1985)

THE LAST TIME THE WORLD HAD HEARD from Miles Davis, in the fall of 1975, he'd been fronting what might have been the loudest band in jazz. It was certainly one of the most aggressive. The slamming drums, the wall of guitars, the skronking saxophone, the piercing shrieks of dissonant organ, the rattling

of percussion at the edges, and Miles's wah-wah-soaked trumpet squealing in the middle of it all—it was a physical force, that music, and when all at once it vanished, the silence that rushed in was deafening.

That silence lasted five years. The gritty details have been the subject of a few books, Miles's own autobiography in particular. He wrote,

> *From 1975 until early 1980 I didn't pick up my horn; for over four years, didn't pick it up once. I would walk by and look at it, then think about trying to play. But after a while I didn't even do that. . . . Mostly during those four or five years that I was out of music, I just took a lot of cocaine (about $500 a day at one point) and fucked all the women I could get into my house. . . . Sex and drugs took the place that music had occupied in my life until then and I did both of them around the clock.*

Eventually, what amounted to an intervention took place. Miles's family, along with cellist Paul Buckmaster (who'd first befriended him in the run-up to the *On the Corner* sessions), got his apartment cleaned up and him ready to re-enter the world of the living. Soon, he was in touch with George Butler, a man who'd become a major figure at Columbia Records in Davis's absence, and was talking about returning to the recording studio.

Few ties to his previous incarnation remained. Though Miles started out working with drummer Al Foster and guitarist Pete Cosey, both veterans soon departed. Davis turned next to family. He started working with his nephew, drummer Vincent Wilburn. Wilburn brought in three friends from Chicago: guitarist/vocalist Randy Hall, Robert Irving III on keyboards, and Felton Crews on bass. Saxophonist Bill Evans, a student who came recommended by Dave Liebman, also joined the group.

This band recorded nearly two dozen songs, from which Miles picked the ones he liked, and overdubbed his trumpet parts. "The Man with the Horn," the title track of Miles's comeback album, is one; another was "Shout," a funky pop-R&B tune that also featured guitarist Barry Finnerty.

Note that, on these tunes and going forward, the recording process was closer to that of a pop record than a jazz album. The guided improvisation, followed by editing, that had been the strategy from 1969 to 1975 was done. Miles wasn't in any condition to actually work with a band. His chops weren't in shape, and his embouchure was as shot as the rest of his body. Indeed, producer Teo Macero (who worked on a later session for *The Man with the Horn*) has claimed that certain high notes were reached by slowing down the tape as Miles was playing. He also asserts that solos were spliced together after the fact. Neither of these is doubtful, considering how ragged Davis sounds on much of the album.

The rest of *The Man with the Horn* featured a different band. Drummer Al Foster returned, and a bunch of fresh faces—bassist Marcus Miller, saxo-

phonist Evans, percussionist Sammy Figueroa, and guitarist Finnerty—made up the rest of the group. This ensemble recorded three tracks: "Back Seat Betty," "Ursula" and "Aïda." Finnerty wasn't giving Miles what he wanted, though, and he was replaced by another young gun, Mike Stern, for the track "Fat Time."

"Fat Time" opens the album in a manner that's both assured and shocking. There are no two ways about it: This song has nothing to do with jazz. It's the sound of Miles severing ties. It's a statement. The first thing you hear is the rhythm section—Marcus Miller's throbbing Fender bassline and Al Foster's blues-march drumming. Miles enters on muted horn, working a series of variations on a basic, subtly soulful melody, and Mike Stern skulks in the corner, playing slightly distorted, boppish tangles of notes. He's amplified, but he's not doing much with it—not yet, anyway.

Just shy of the three-minute mark, Bill Evans begins a soft, tender soprano saxophone solo. At this point, the track is still a funky strut, with Miller popping bass strings and Foster chopping away at the rhythm. In fact, the back line is more interesting than the lead instruments. The song feels like something you could listen to while walking around, without really focusing on it. But Stern can be heard building in the background, getting louder, like a swarm of locusts on the horizon. And after two minutes of delicate work from Evans, the guitarist takes over, and "Fat Time" is suddenly a whole different track.

Stern's solo is a screaming hard-rock attack. Foster steps up, crashing the cymbals as the guitarist explodes. His use of distortion and power chords takes him into territory occupied only by the heaviest seventies fusioneers (think the Mahavishnu Orchestra's *Live—Between Nothingness and Eternity*). It's totally outside the context of the tune as it's existed to that moment. When Pete Cosey was ripping out one barbed-wire solo after another, it was somewhat expected, because the rest of the band was playing music just as frenzied and headlong. But Stern's "Fat Time" solo is superimposed over a funky, but not all that aggressive, groove. Plus, even in his debut performance with the group, he's already doing things that are more explicitly metal than any Davis guitarist before him.

The album's second song also features heavy guitar riffing, this time from Finnerty. He dive-bombs and caroms around the neck, but never quite equals the brain-blasting power of Stern. It's no surprise he didn't keep the gig for very long. He was a solid player, but not adventurous enough (a judgment borne out by seeing him live with Children on the Corner in 2003), and, the way Miles tells it in his autobiography, he was more interested in exploring his own ideas than the boss's.

The only "jazz" track on *The Man with the Horn* is "Ursula," the album closer. Miller's electric bassline swings, locking in with Foster's soothing

hi-hat groove. Miles solos, muted, over this shifting but essentially steady ground, exploring ideas tentatively, still feeling the ground beneath his feet and not yet ready to leap into space. At its best moments, the nearly eleven-minute piece recalls the work of Davis's final acoustic quintet. As with that band, he lets the rhythm section's tautness and sense of adventure carry the music, freeing him up to be as introspective as he likes.

Though it should probably be swept under the rug as an embarrassment, the album's title track must be at least mentioned. It's awful. "The Man with the Horn" is a soft-centered R&B ballad with cloying lyrics extolling Miles's greatness. It wouldn't be out of place on any "quiet storm" radio station, except for its worst element—the trumpet. Davis is playing through a synth pedal or something, disguising his horn as a particularly glutinous keyboard patch. The song was recorded in 1980, when he'd barely staggered out of his brownstone and into the studio, so the missing chops are no real surprise. But the vocal is unctuous and, frankly, irritating. Miles would make this same mistake again, a decade later, with "The Doo-Bop Song" and "Blow." Jazz vocal is rarely better than an annoyance, but when it's on an album by an instrumentalist whose very appeal is the closeness of his sound to that of the human voice, it's unwelcome competition. Miles Davis should be the only person singing on a Miles Davis album.

Still, "Fat Time," "Back Seat Betty," "Aïda," and "Ursula" (and, okay, even "Shout") make *The Man with the Horn* much more than the sound of a half-broken man creeping back into the studio. They suggest an artistic vitality, an urge to create something glossy but still incisive and meaningful, that would be proven beyond doubt in the years that followed.

Davis made only one more change to his new band's lineup, replacing percussionist Figueroa, in the middle of the *Man with the Horn* sessions, with Mino Cinelu. Then he put the word out that he was coming back to the stage. The big shows were to be two performances at New York's Avery Fisher Hall on July 2, 1981, closing out the Kool Jazz Festival, but these were preceded by four nights at the Boston club Kix. All of these gigs sold out in absurdly short time, and they were all recorded. Songs from Kix, Avery Fisher Hall, and an October performance in Tokyo were all compiled for the double album *We Want Miles*, one of the best records of Miles's comeback period.

Like its predecessor, *We Want Miles* contains only six tracks. This time, though, they're spread over a double album. The first disc contains two versions of "Jean Pierre" (one long, one short), "Back Seat Betty," and a reworking of "Aïda" from *The Man with the Horn*, now retitled "Fast Track." The second disc holds only two long tracks: "Kix," a funk vamp named for the club where it was recorded, and an extended version of the Gershwin standard "My Man's Gone Now," which Miles had recorded years earlier, with Gil Evans, on the *Porgy and Bess* album.

The first thing you notice, listening to *We Want Miles*, is how sparse and tight the band is. "Jean Pierre," which opens the record, features a simple singsong melody. Miles plays with a mute, and Bill Evans keeps his horn quiet too, sounding almost like someone whistling. The loudest instrument in the mix is Marcus Miller's bass, which pops and rumbles. Al Foster's beats are slow and steady, the snare cracking like a machine driving nails through mahogany.

The first player to get a major solo is Stern. Davis and Evans harmonize together on the melody, and when the trumpeter solos, he sticks close to that simple four-bar line, only offering slight variations on it. Stern goes way out, though, just like on "Fat Time." The same way Michael Henderson's rock-solid basslines provided a foundation for endless spacey improvisations by Pete Cosey, the sparse and repetitive melody of "Jean Pierre," as held down by Marcus Miller, allows Stern to take off on a wild solo journey that's easily one of the highlights of *We Want Miles*. The ten-minute full-length version that opens the disc really displays the inventiveness, energy, and force of the band. The shorter version, edited for (I guess) radio play, maintains the hypnotic power of the melody but loses a lot of the most fascinating solo stuff.

The Miller/Foster/Cinelu rhythm section was an incredibly subtle and telepathic team. There are times on *We Want Miles* where Foster and Cinelu enter into dialogue that's as funky as anything on a George Clinton album, and as connected to African and Caribbean traditions as anything by, say, the Art Ensemble of Chicago. And when Miller's throbbing basslines are added, the blend is not funk, but not jazz. It's not pop, but it's melodic and it's got a groove that's hard to resist.

The October 4, 1981 concert that yielded the versions of "Jean Pierre" on *We Want Miles* was released in its entirety on a Japanese-only album, *Miles! Miles! Miles!* Since its tracks were recorded roughly six months after the New York and Boston shows, they're an excellent display of the band's evolution. The grooves are tighter, Miles's solos are stronger and feature more open horn, and the pieces being performed, while even longer than those on *We Want Miles*, never seem diffuse. It was at this point, after the band had been together for some time, that the music Davis had in his head in the early 1980s emerged clearly defined.

It was a step beyond 1975. It was as if the last band, in all its baroque ethno-acid-funk-metal fury, had been an elaborate cocoon from which he'd burst. The new Miles was stalking the city streets, ready for action. It paralleled the transition in black pop from funk and soul to hip-hop, but it prefigured that change, since hip-hop wouldn't mount a wholesale takeover of black pop until about 1986. Still, I think the comparison is apt.

Miles's music of the mid-seventies was as loud and multifaceted and chaotic as a live P-Funk jam. Sure, the rhythm was there; Al Foster was as

dead on the one in 1975 as in 1981. But there were a dozen things going on all at once. It's hard to know where to focus the ear during the more adventurous passages on *Agharta* and *Pangaea*. This was true of other Seventies acts, too, both white and black. Earth, Wind & Fire were as progressive as Yes, albeit in a different way, and their interlacing of horn charts, basslines and multiple complementary percussionists had a lot of the same flavor as Miles's records and, particularly, performances.

When he returned, though, black pop had changed. Bands were no longer working with large ensembles, preferring to strip down to a few core musicians and program the rest with synthesizers. Furthermore, the rhythms on the radio were less complex and more straight-ahead. This was in part because the influence of the first, ultra-primitive hip-hop singles was beginning to filter into the mainstream, at least in New York. It's easy to imagine first-generation hip-hop DJs like Kool Herc or Grand Wizard Theodore cutting up *We Want Miles* or *The Man with the Horn*. The drums are tight, the bass is booming. Never mind *Doo-Bop*—Miles was making hip-hop records a decade before that.

The next studio album retained much of the power of the live band. *Star People* was notable from three angles.

For one thing, it was the bluesiest record Miles had made since going electric. He'd recorded a lot of stripped-down tracks in 1970, but only "Go Ahead John" demonstrated the reverence with which Miles regarded the blues. His indescribable music of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the hard funk he'd come back playing, permitted many to forget that Davis was always, at his heart, a blues player. *Star People* was a reminder.

The second factor was that the album marked the end of Miles's relationship with producer Teo Macero. They'd begun working together in the late 1950s, and it was the combination of Davis's creativity and Macero's technological innovations that yielded most of the trumpeter's major musical statements between 1969 and 1975, as discussed in Chapter Five. During the recording of *Star People*, though, that relationship, which had often been fractious, finally broke down.

Nobody seems to know for sure why this happened. Miles didn't tell Macero why he didn't want to work with him anymore, and the explanations he did offer a few journalists were cryptic and, if one takes them on faith, sounded more like personal disputes than musical differences. Davis described Macero as a cranky old man, forever complaining and not really wanting to work hard. Aside from the work-ethic issue, that's a portrait echoed by others, and supported by the producer's own quotes in interviews. He doesn't sound like the nicest guy in the world, so it's not out of the realm of possibility that this pair of pissed-off bastards might finally have come to find each other intolerable.

It's also possible, of course, that Davis viewed Macero as a link to the past, one that had to be severed for him to move forward creatively. But another longtime collaborator returned for *Star People*: arranger Gil Evans. He wasn't there to put together an orchestral backdrop for Miles, as he'd done before. He was assisting with a brand-new approach to composition.

In the late sixties, Davis and Macero had sculpted studio tracks from swaths of improvisation, splicing the highlights together into suites like "Pharaoh's Dance" and "Shhh/Peaceful." On *Star People*, Miles was still using improvisation as a base, but in a wholly different way. He brought Evans in to transcribe bandmembers' improvised solos. These transcripts were then harvested for evocative passages, which became the melodies of album tracks like "Star on Cicely" and "It Gets Better."

Star People moves through several moods. It opens with "Come Get It," a fast funk-rock number with the most complex bassline on the album. Marcus Miller pops and slaps the strings, and the rest of the band falls in line with him. Miles plays open horn, blowing tight spirals of high notes. Mike Stern takes the final solo of the piece, crisp and clean, with occasional quick trips out.

The next track, "It Gets Better," is slower and more meditative. It begins with gut-rumbles of synth, and then moves into a slow, bluesy groove. It's a nice piece, with muted soloing from Miles. Behind him, there's something else interesting going on. Al Foster's cymbal sound is fed through some kind of synth; it sounds sharp, like someone crunching glass between his teeth.

Star People is a very orderly album. Davis alternates between muted and open horn from one track to the next, throughout the record. Similarly, upbeat tracks are followed by ballads. Side One of the vinyl ends with "Speak," a shimmering, jumpy track that Miles used to open concerts in 1983 and 1984, often pairing it with "That's What Happened," from *Decoy*.

The title track is a meandering blues, nearly nineteen minutes long. It's made up of two completely separate sections, bridged by keyboard interludes that sound almost like pipe organ. Miles played the synthesizer on *Star People*—an Oberheim, set to factory preset A1. He didn't know how to program it, but that involuntary artlessness has the effect of making the music that much purer and more incisive.

As the blues itself is a music made from the simplest of materials— "the $1.50 drums," as Miles put it in his autobiography—so this music, striving for transcendence, achieves it precisely through the rejection of technique. Greg Tate compares the Miles Davis of *Star People* as "[like] Picasso when he ran out of ideas," playing what he calls "muted blues clichés over funk vamps that were old in 1970." Tate asserts this is Davis having fun at his own expense. I submit that it's more a case of going back to first things, and in this way, it's of a piece with the rest of his catalog.

Miles was always about stripping away artifice, whether by avoiding vibrato or employing a close-miked Harmon mute to give the impression of one-on-one communication—from his horn to your heart, as it were. The use of the wah-wah pedal with the 1970s band, far from being a distancing device as was claimed by jazz-centric critics, was another tactic in the war on frippery. It was, in effect, Miles abandoning the lead role, shrugging off the star's mantle and immersing himself in the maelstrom of the band sound. The simplicity of the music on *Star People* was poppy—and thus, aimed at a larger audience than the then-rarefied and self-selecting jazz crowd. At the same time, it was intricate and as rewarding, for a focused listener, as anything Miles had recorded to that point.

When Mike Stern left, in 1983, it was the beginning of a wholesale revamping of the band. Marcus Miller was out the door soon, too, replaced by Darryl Jones. Robert Irving III, not heard from since the 1980 sessions that yielded "Shout" and "The Man with the Horn," was brought back on board as a full-time keyboardist. This allowed Miles to focus on the trumpet more, as his chops had almost fully returned. Bob Berg, who from time to time also played synth, replaced Bill Evans. Drummer Al Foster and percussionist Mino Cinelu stuck around—for a while, anyway. Before this new band was fully assembled, though, Miles headed into the studio to cut his next album.

Decoy documents these lineup changes. Two of its seven tracks are live recordings from the Montreal Jazz Festival in 1983; those feature Scofield, Evans, Jones, Foster, Cinelu, and Davis. Three more are full-band studio performances, with Irving's keyboards added to the lineup. Evans is gone, but Berg has yet to arrive, so special guest Branford Marsalis handles the saxophone chores.

Two of *Decoy*'s songs are stripped-down electronic experiments, with no guitar or saxophone. One of them, "Freaky Deaky," is practically an update of 1972's "Rated X." There's no trumpet on the track; Miles plays keyboards over a Jones bassline that's a hyper update of Henry Mancini's *Peter Gunn* theme. Al Foster's drums are electronically treated, echoing as though from deep space. Mino Cinelu's congas, heard softly at the edges of the sonic field, are a conscious echo of Mtume's contributions to "He Loved Him Madly," Miles's last journey into this kind of space-trance territory. Though it's only four minutes long, "Freaky Deaky" creates as strong a mood as anything else on *Decoy*.

Throughout the album, the keyboards are better used than on any 1980s Davis record, even *Tutu*. "Freaky Deaky" aside, they're accents rather than lead instruments; John Scofield's guitar provides the riffs that propel the funk. Darryl Jones spends more time popping his bass strings than Marcus Miller did, giving the album a greater drive than *Star People* or *We Want Miles*.

Decoy is generally a much more upbeat album than its immediate predecessors. Five of its seven tracks are fast funk themes; the other two are keyboard-driven, atmospheric pieces—"Freaky Deaky" and the minute-long "Robot 415." Miles and Scofield solo energetically throughout, but Marsalis doesn't contribute as much as might be hoped. In 1984, he was just beginning to build his reputation, alongside his trumpet-playing younger brother and as a headliner. Miles limited Branford to the soprano on *Decoy*, though, and the results were somewhat disappointing.

After Wayne Shorter's departure, Davis seemed to become enamored with the sound of the soprano saxophone. It was extremely rare for anyone who took his place—Gary Bartz, Steve Grossman, Carlos Garnett, Sonny Fortune, or Dave Liebman; never mind short-timers like Azar Lawrence—to pick up the alto or the tenor, in concert or on record. In the case of *Decoy*, the reedy sound of Marsalis's soprano, blending as it does with Miles's own high-pitched, muted tone, made the horns arguably the least interesting elements of the music. In search of excitement, the ear winds up focusing on the guitars, bass, and keyboards. Maybe Miles wanted it this way; it's hard to determine.

There's one more interesting thing about *Decoy*: its producer. This was the first album Miles recorded after severing relations with Teo Macero, and he chose to man the boards himself. Keyboardist Robert Irving III helped him out, as did drummer/nephew Vincent Wilburn, but it was a gesture of independence like none Davis had made in years.

Though he'd always maintained the image of individualism and leadership, the truth was that most of his best studio work, *Kind of Blue* being a notable exception, had been collaborative in nature. Whether it was his use of Gil Evans as arranger and creative partner in the late 1950s, or the two-headed-beast nature of the electric albums from 1969 to 1974, which depended as much on Macero's creativity as his own and that of the various sidemen involved (Joe Zawinul in particular), Miles had always worked best with an equally strong creative partner, or pool of partners, from which to draw inspiration and energy. Suddenly, he was going into the studio as a true leader for the first time in many years.

The band Davis formed to tour behind *Decoy* was much more energetic than the 1981–83 aggregation. When he first returned to live playing, the music was funky, but it was sparse and midtempo. Miles felt more comfortable with tunes like the singsong, slowish "Jean Pierre" as his chops came back into shape. But that was in 1981. By 1984, he was playing through a mute most of the time, but he was also back in control of the horn, and eager to display his returned power to ever-larger audiences.

The *Complete Miles Davis at Montreux* boxed set documents two concerts by this lineup. Both sets are identical: a mix of material from *We Want*

Miles, Star People, Decoy, and the yet-unreleased *You're Under Arrest,* plus a few tunes that would never appear on any album, like "Lake Geneva," named in tribute to the festival's Swiss location. From the first number, the shows are a radical reshaping of everything Miles had been since his return to live performance in 1981.

"Speak/That's What Happened" is the perfect opener: a rave-up, a churning funk bassline supporting a rousing, fanfare-like melody. It starts things off with a bang, just like in the 1970s. After that, the band slows down for a thoughtful version of the bluesiest tune in Davis's repertoire at that point, "Star People." It's less than nine minutes long—half what it was on the studio album. For the rest of the concert, faster songs alternate, in pairs, with slower ones. "What It Is," from *Decoy,* is followed by "It Gets Better," then epic (ten-minutes-plus) treatments of "Something's on Your Mind" and the Cyndi Lauper ballad "Time After Time." The set continues with a medley of "Hopscotch" and "Star on Cicely," followed by a solo spot for bassist Darryl Jones, "Jean Pierre," "Lake Geneva," and a seven-minute reprise of "Something's on Your Mind," closing things out in a way that not only reaffirms Davis's commitment to the blues, but provides circular closure to the concert.

Every member of the 1984 band is in fierce, hammering form on those live recordings. Since Michael Henderson's tenure, the bass had been a lead instrument. The more stripped-down and song-oriented material of the 1980s allows Darryl Jones to expand that already assertive role. His solo, the only one given separate billing, is more than enough evidence of that. Saxophonist Berg and guitarist Scofield play high-speed funk riffs, which lead into extended, raucous solos, from Berg in particular. He's combining R&B honking with Coltrane-esque runs, to energizing effect. Keyboardist Irving and percussionist Thornton provide support at the margins, while Al Foster's slamming drums keep everything moving forward. But it's Miles who's the biggest surprise.

Davis was playing through a wireless radio microphone attached to his horn, which allowed him to move around onstage. From 1981 to 1983, he'd scuttled around, encouraging his sidemen and blowing a few notes from time to time. He hadn't had the chops to mount many serious solos, though. By 1984, that had changed. Miles was arguably in better form than he'd been since 1969, shooting out powerful bursts of notes and heading higher into the trumpet's range than he'd done in years.

This same re-energized Miles headed into the studio numerous times in late 1984 and early 1985, recording one or two tracks at a time for the album *You're Under Arrest.* Before the end of the year, Darryl Jones would leave the group and join Sting's band. However, on the record, the band is the same one that emerged at the end of the *Decoy* sessions. As on that

album, the three songwriters in the band were Davis, Irving, and Scofield. The music was, if anything, even poppier than on *Decoy*, focusing on strong melodies and choruses backed by midtempo funk rhythms. There were three outside songs interpreted by the group on *You're Under Arrest*, and two of them became strongly identified with Miles in the years that followed. He played "Human Nature" (written by Toto, but Michael Jackson's version is the best-known one) and Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time" until the end of his life.

You're Under Arrest, often mischaracterized as a craven pop move, is in fact one of Miles's most politically aware records. He'd had his share of problems with police ever since taking a truncheon to the head outside Birdland in 1959. He'd been arrested numerous times, for drugs as well as for threatening a female tenant in his building, and his habit of speeding in the Ferraris he favored attracted unwelcome attention. On the album's opening track, "One Phone Call/Street Scenes," the churning funk of the band—a rewrite of the riff from "Right Off"—is overlaid with argumentative dialogue between Miles and "cops" played by Sting, Steve Thornton, Marek Olko, and Davis himself. (We also hear the sound of coke being snorted, which pissed off critic Stanley Crouch to no end.)

The album's closing track is another statement, albeit a more oblique one. "Jean Pierre," which Miles had been playing since 1981, finally made its studio debut in a medley with "You're Under Arrest" and "And Then There Were None." Co-written by Davis and Irving, the latter track is a showcase for the keyboardist. There are layers of whooshing and roaring sound effects, emulating hellish winds, death screams, and fire consuming the landscape. Samples of a crying baby, a missile-launch countdown, and a nuclear explosion are also heard. But in the middle of all that, Irving plays a melody that's quite beautiful. The apocalyptic track is Davis's oblique comment on the then-raging Cold War.

The most interesting music on *You're Under Arrest*, though, is the trilogy of songs in the album's middle stretch, between "Human Nature" and "Time After Time." These include the medley "MD 1/Something's On Your Mind/MD 2," "Ms. Morrisine," and "Katia."

The band's arrangement of "Something's on Your Mind" is funky and upbeat. Miles plays through the mute and sticks to the melody for most of the song's running time, though he spins off some nice open-horn runs at about the five-minute mark. John Scofield takes two rockist guitar solos, heavily laden with effects. Al Foster's drums are electronic, a *Miami Vice*–like thwack. The song is bracketed by the two "MD" tracks, which are made up of keyboard swooshes and squiggles, and little more.

"Ms. Morrisine" is a reggae number. Foster's electronic drums are perfect for this song, giving it an icy feel, like a Sly and Robbie production of

similar vintage. (Check their album *Language Barrier* for comparison.) Miles's solos are a fascinating choice. He plays open horn, and lingers in the trumpet's middle range, with a rich tone reminiscent of his flügelhorn work on *Sketches of Spain*. The Spanish sound and the reggae lilt of the main melody create an ominous mood that's bolstered by low, rumbling guitar riffs from guest John McLaughlin. "Ms. Morrisine" sounds like something that might be heard on a mid-eighties James Bond movie soundtrack set in the tropics, and that's really not meant as an insult.

"Katia" is an even more emphatic showcase for McLaughlin. It's easily the least structured track on *You're Under Arrest*. Fading in with the guitarist in mid-solo (another thirty seconds or so of fretboard action makes up the "Katia Prelude"), it continues on with nothing but a steady pulse, as Zenlike and repetitive as anything Michael Henderson was playing in 1972, underpinning the music. The guitar solos are distorted and ugly, even skronky, and since the backing keyboard line is basically one repeated note, they appear apropos of nothing, floating in a space of their own creation. Miles's playing is equally unfettered, though not as deliberately offensive or "free."

"Katia" feels like something from an entirely separate project, dropped into *You're Under Arrest* to give the record a sufficient running time. It's certainly at the same level of artistry as the rest of the album, but what it's attempting to accomplish is totally different. There is no crisp melody, no pop sheen. "Katia" fades in, and fades out, like a chunk of a much larger work. It's more admirable than ingratiating, but it hints at a possible alternate direction for Miles, into harder, even heavier music. Something like "Katia" might have been the result of continuing the *Agharta/Pangaea/Dark Magus* aesthetic into the 1980s, with the relevant technological upgrades.

Some have criticized Davis for recording "Human Nature" and "Time After Time." The studio versions, while not totally without merit, don't expand on the songs' original arrangements the way he'd deconstructed standards like "Stella by Starlight" or "My Funny Valentine" in prior decades. But live, it was a different story. Both tunes became showcase vehicles for the band, and for Davis, "Human Nature" in particular. In concert, he took the simple pop melodies and, as he'd done with the singsong "Jean Pierre," played against the rhythm section, spiraling into the stratosphere. His command of the trumpet's upper register allowed him to recast both songs in ways he hadn't done on *You're Under Arrest*.

This indicates that Miles still viewed studio recordings and live performance not as two sides of a coin, but as entirely different things. For a time in the late sixties and early seventies, he'd explored the potential of the recording studio as an artistic gesture. But that period had ended in 1974. In the 1980s, Miles saw studio albums as vehicles to get people to the shows—an attitude that had held sway in the jazz community since the

1950s. This was ironic, since in the last decade of his life, Davis was playing music that had less to do with jazz than at any prior time in his career. But the recording of pop songs also demonstrates that he still viewed his music as having commercial potential. On the latter score, he was correct: "Human Nature" and "Time After Time" *did* become hits in Europe, and they're still being played on U.S. "smooth jazz" radio today.

The last recording Miles made for Columbia was completed more or less at the same time as *You're Under Arrest*, but it wasn't released until 1989, four years after he'd left the label. In 1984, Davis traveled to Denmark to receive the Sonning Music Prize, awarded by the Leonie Sonning Music Foundation. This was the first time the award had been given to a non-classical performer. Previous recipients included Leonard Bernstein, Olivier Messaien, Isaac Stern, and Igor Stravinsky.

Palle Mikkelborg, a trumpeter, composer, and conductor influenced by (in addition to Miles) Messaien, Charles Ives, and, perhaps most important of all, Gil Evans, wrote and arranged a piece to be performed at the award ceremony. He called it *Aura*. Each of the letters in Miles's name—M I L E S D A V I S—was assigned a note, and these eight notes became the main theme of the symphony. The whole piece ran to eight movements and lasted nearly fifty minutes. Miles was to play only during the final movement. At the eventual concert, he did that, but the applause was so enthusiastic that he wound up performing almost an hour's worth of encores, including two more runs through the final section of *Aura* and versions of "Jean Pierre" and "Time After Time," backed by the orchestra and Scofield.

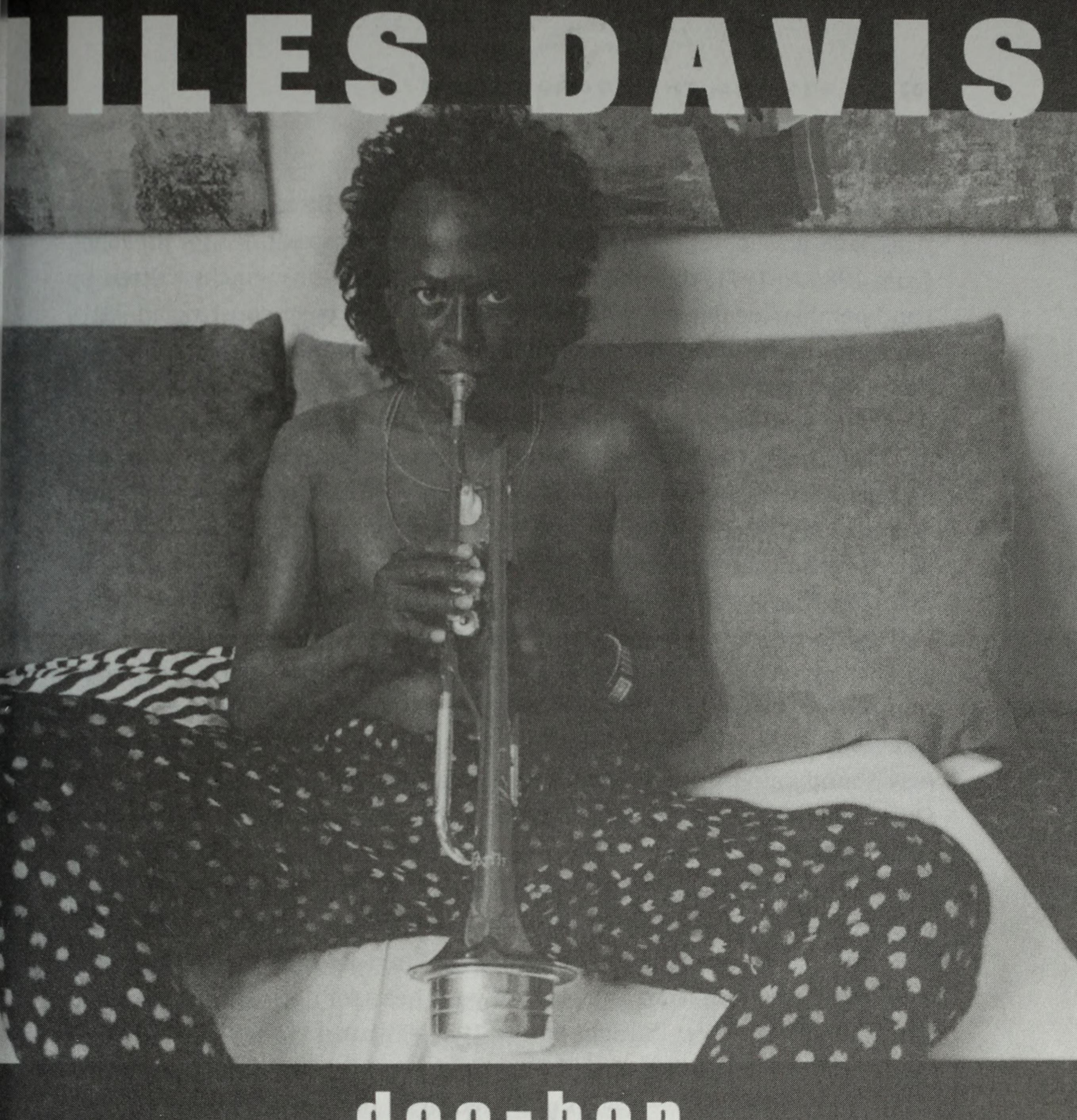
A month or so later, Miles decided he wanted to record *Aura*. He called Mikkelborg and asked him to make the arrangements, and then traveled to Denmark, with Vincent Wilburn, for the sessions. These were spread out over five days. On the first day, Miles recorded with just the rhythm section. The following day, an oboe player and a harpist joined the group. The full orchestra arrived for the third, fourth, and fifth days of recording.

Guitarist John McLaughlin happened to be in Denmark to play some concerts, and Miles invited him to the studio with Mikkelborg and the orchestra. McLaughlin recorded guitar solos on three tracks—"White," "Orange" and "Violet"—and played the ten-note theme statement that introduces and sets up the entire piece.

Aura is a fascinating album. Like pretty much everything Miles Davis recorded after 1969, it's not jazz. It's symphonic and even grandiose at times, but the synthesizers and electronic percussion, and the absence of strings, put it into the realm of electroacoustic music rather than classical. There are elements of funk, and some punchy, forceful rhythms, particularly in the earlier sections. Other movements are rooted more in orchestral music, rising and falling with the oceanic swells of a symphony.

Miles's playing is strong throughout. He switches between muted and open horn, and at a few points what he plays is reminiscent of his acoustic years. He doesn't concentrate on the squiggly bursts of notes that had marked his post-1981 performances and recordings. Instead, he plays long, thematically unified passages that mesh beautifully with the almost overfull sound of the band Mikkelborg has assembled behind him.

For reasons that remain unclear, though, Columbia wasn't very high on *Aura* when Miles turned it in, in early 1985. He wanted to remix it digitally, for release, and was refused the $1,400 the procedure would have cost. In fact, the label didn't want to release the record at all. This was one more instance, like the mishandling of *On the Corner* and the decision to promote the patchy and listener-unfriendly *At Fillmore* rather than the masterful *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, that made Davis feel Columbia didn't understand him and didn't value him as an artist. The fact was, Columbia *was* concentrating most of its energy on publicizing its new wunderkind, Wynton Marsalis, and Miles knew it. When his producer, George Butler, asked him to call Marsalis on the younger man's birthday, Davis had finally had it. By the end of 1985, he had resolved to leave Columbia Records for Warner Bros., after a thirty-year relationship that, despite occasional bouts of combativeness, had been a huge success, artistically and commercially, for both parties.



CHAPTER TWELVE
BIG TIME (1986–1991)

WHEN MILES MOVED FROM COLUMBIA to Warner Bros., he signed a contract that offered him a reported seven-figure advance but surrendered his publishing royalties to the label. This was on the advice of manager David Franklin, who'd taken over Miles's affairs when he married actress, and fellow

Franklin client, Cicely Tyson. Following his belated discovery of this injustice, Davis vowed never to record any of his own compositions for the label. From 1986 to 1991, the albums he released featured only tracks written by bandmembers or outside collaborators. The pieces were constructed without him, and he came subsequently to the studio and laid down solos. The first album produced in this way was *Tutu*, and it was as much a sonic departure as it was a change in studio methodology.

Tutu was written primarily, and performed almost entirely, by bassist Marcus Miller. The only non-Miller tunes were "Backyard Ritual" and "Perfect Way." Keyboardist George Duke contributed the former, and Miles didn't even bother re-recording it. He used the original demo, synthesizer saxophone lines and all, on the album. "Perfect Way" is a version of a song by English avant-pop group Scritti Politti. Miller programmed synthesizers and drum machines, played soprano saxophone and bass clarinet on a few numbers, and even laid down trumpet guide tracks. When all that was finished, Miles showed up and did his part. Further contributions to the icy new sound came from percussionists Paulinho DaCosta, Steve Reid, and Omar Hakim, electric violinist Michal Urbaniak, and Duke. At the time, some griped that *Tutu* should have been marketed as a Marcus Miller solo album, featuring special guest Miles Davis. That may be an accurate interpretation of the division of labor, but the final product is pure Miles.

"Tutu," which opens the album, is striking. Its melody builds over a slow-boiling funk rhythm and stays in your head for days after you hear it. The feel Marcus Miller brought to the 1981–83 band is back—a slow, simmering, bluesy sway, replacing the agitated pop-funk grooves of *Decoy* and *You're Under Arrest*. Miller always preferred to let the music seep into the listener's consciousness. Like Miles, he understood that the space between notes is as important as the notes themselves. Miller gave Davis, and the arrangements, plenty of breathing room. "Tutu" has the same seductive rhythm, the same needle-stabs of muted horn punctuating the beat, as "Jean Pierre" or any other track from *We Want Miles*. It's a statement: the party-time Miles of the mid-eighties is gone. The quiet, seething Miles, the Miles you should maybe be a little afraid of, is back.

On the album's second cut, "Tomaas," Davis engages in a call-and-response with Miller's soprano saxophone. This is not the result of in-studio playing, but overdubbing. The effect is what counts, though. Miller also plays bass clarinet on the track, murmuring low in the background, behind the sharp funk guitar and whipcrack eighties-style synth drums, played by Omar Hakim.

One of *Tutu*'s most powerful standout cuts, aside from its title track, is the next-to-last song, "Don't Lose Your Mind." The groove is thick, bass-heavy reggae, punctuated with jarring *musique concréte* sound effects: slam-

ming doors, gunshots, and sharp four-note blasts of synth like car alarms going off out of nowhere but always on the beat. Miller plays bass clarinet again, in addition to laying down an impossibly deep dub groove. Near the end of the track, Miles plays open horn for a few brief seconds, the only time he does it anywhere on the album.

But in the middle of all this, it's Michal Urbaniak's electric violin solo that really catches the ear. It floats above the music like a bird of prey, swooping and flipping in the air. Urbaniak avoids the pyrotechnics offered by electric violinists in 1970s fusion, preferring to stick to the relaxed but ominous vibe the rest of the track creates.

Again, *Tutu* is a cohesive statement. It's a lot like *On the Corner* in that way, though it's much more listener-friendly than that most hostile of Davis's albums. From its stark full-face cover shot to the Spike Lee–directed video for the title track, which finds Miles walking, head down and horn to lips, through a neon-lit landscape, *Tutu* is part of a package, the trumpeter reborn. New record label, new image, new sound—the sound of Miles Davis Future—and the most impressive thing about *Tutu* is how much it *doesn't* sound like a 1980s artifact. Pulling it out now, and playing it, is *not* like playing any R&B or pop album released the same year. This is because *Tutu* makes no concessions. Its embrace of technology has nothing to do with getting on the radio (though that happened), and everything to do with embracing digital coldness as an aesthetic strategy.

Listening to *Tutu*, you can almost visualize Miles's frozen breath hissing from the muted bell of the gleaming red trumpet. It's an album that contains pop hooks but doesn't make a fetish of them, focusing instead on grooves that hum and tick like a room full of computers all communicating with each other. Miles's melancholy, muted solos circle delicately around the rhythms, hidden between the bass and the drums and the synths that moan like choirs of digital angels. He's the last man standing in *Tutu*'s machine world, and that only makes his playing even more achingly human than it was with the 1960s acoustic quintet. *Tutu* is stark, mechanistic, and steely cold, and these qualities are precisely what make it one of Miles's most enduring albums.

Davis's collaboration with Marcus Miller continued into 1987. The trumpeter was asked to record a soundtrack to the disorienting drama *Siesta*. In the film, Ellen Barkin plays a daredevil aerialist who tracks down Gabriel Byrne, a lost love, prior to attempting a stunt that may kill her.

Critic Roger Ebert described *Siesta* as "the kind of bad film that remains quite watchable until fairly late in the game, when you realize that you've made more of an effort to figure it out than the director has." That's about right. Its portrayal of jaded Eurotrash is fun but ultimately insubstantial, as is the movie as a whole. The soundtrack, though, is a whole different story.

As he'd done with *Tutu*, Miles placed the bulk of the compositional chores on Miller's shoulders. The bassist, in turn, wrote, produced, and played much of an album, released under the title *Music from Siesta*, that's the most mysterious and fascinating of all Davis's late-eighties works. Furthermore, Miller received co-billing with Miles on the cover—one of his earliest credits as a leader.

Siesta takes place in Spain. Miller seized the opportunity this presented to explore some of the same territory Gil Evans had mapped with *Sketches of Spain*. The newer album wasn't bound to the tonal limits of a live orchestra, though. Miller stuck to his *Tutu* methodology, constructing most of the tracks on synthesizers, and playing bass, soprano sax, and bass clarinet when the occasion demanded it. Guests Earl Klugh and James Walker contributed minimalist splashes of guitar and flute, respectively. A few other pieces, making up no more than twelve of the album's thirty-five minutes, were performed by a quartet—Miles, John Scofield on guitar, Miller on all the instruments previously listed, and Omar Hakim on drums.

Music from Siesta is extremely spare. There are no upbeat tracks. Almost all the melodies are left up to Davis. They're fairly simple, constructed like puzzles made of jagged glass. Miller and Davis don't seem like they want to get too close to each other. The bassist always seems conscious that the music is meant to exist in the background of a movie. It drifts and very occasionally attracts attention to itself, but for the most part it's extremely moody stuff, implying as much as it overtly states.

Establishing that sense of implication was the trick Miller pulled most expertly on *Music from Siesta*: He created a Spanish vibe while barely referencing Spanish music in the melodies at all. Sure, on "Conchita/Lament," the keyboards emulate a Ravel–esque bullfight theme. And Miles's trumpet solos echo the emotional desolation of *Sketches of Spain*. But for the most part, the *Siesta* music is a soundtrack to red skies and bleached bones in the sand, even more than to the movie for which it was commissioned. The disc begins with infernal winds, howling through the speakers, and it's that harsh, scorched-earth feel that dominates throughout its brief running time.

During the 1980s, Miles frequently attempted to create a fuller sound with synthesizers. The keyboardists in his live bands from 1984 to 1986 mostly played single chords, punching them in rhythmically in imitation of the brass section of a swing-era big band. They were a little bit bludgeoning sometimes, shoving the most dominant chords into listeners' ears. They rarely soloed or provided interesting textures. This gave much of the music of these years a crude, unsubtle feel, as though Miles was sounding an air horn to regain the audience's attention.

Fortunately, this was a short phase, and *Music from Siesta* proves that he didn't need to resort to such ploys. It demands focused attention. Its delicate pieces run the risk of coming apart as they play themselves out. It's easy to want to tiptoe in the presence of this music, lest you disrupt it, like walking through a cobweb. This is a route Davis should have taken more often, particularly in concert. With *Music from Siesta,* he proved that his mastery of insinuation and stage whispering had not faded with time.

Miles's removal of the mute that had been omnipresent on *Tutu* and its predecessors is one of the factors that makes *Music from Siesta* worth visiting again and again. For the first time in years, he plays open horn throughout the album, and that full, clear, vibratoless sound is very welcome. With the mute, he'd taken to playing mostly small shreds of sound that floated on the breeze, slightly behind the funk beats, and sounded almost like Ornette Coleman's intricate blues cogitations. On *Music from Siesta,* though, Miles returned to the dreamlike ballad melodies that had made his name in the 1950s, completing his ideas rather than letting them shimmer away, leaving only impressions behind. He was painting in broad strokes, rather than sketching on the fly.

Miles's third Warner Bros. album was *Amandla*. Where *Music from Siesta* had been assembled in only three weeks, the new record required multiple sessions, from June 1987 all the way through January 1989, with nearly a year off in the middle. Though *Amandla* was another Marcus Miller production, there was a larger cast of characters than before. Some members of Davis's live band appeared, as did some other guests. Among these contributors were saxophonist Kenny Garrett, keyboardist Joey DeFrancesco, guitarist Jean-Paul Bourelly, and "lead bassist" Foley McCreary. Several drummers appeared on *Amandla,* including Al Foster and Ricky Wellman.

McCreary, as discussed in Chapter Eight, was one of the more fascinating musicians to pass through Miles's employ in the 1980s. His treatment of the bass as an oversized, fuller-sounding guitar, and his facility for long, fretboard-fracturing solos, isn't used to full advantage on *Amandla,* but even when he's just filling in backgrounds, he makes his presence felt. It's a shame more hasn't been heard from him since Miles's death.

Kenny Garrett was just twenty-two when he joined the Davis band, but he'd already begun to make a name for himself, playing with Freddie Hubbard and Art Blakey, among others. He was a welcome addition to the group sound, particularly since Miles allowed him to play something besides the soprano on record. His tone was clean and his phrasing elegant, particularly on the alto, and his postbop mindset was a pleasant contrast with the melodic funk grooves Miller was setting up.

The introduction of Ricky Wellman, who, like Garrett, joined the live band in 1989, was a major boon for Davis too. The drummer was one of the

primary architects of go-go, a type of funk confined to Washington, D.C. and the surrounding area. Go-go is based around syncopated percussion and a loping drum pattern. Live sets blend one song into another with call-and-response chants; performances by leading go-go acts like Chuck Brown and the Soul Searchers (Wellman's former gig) or Trouble Funk might last four hours or more and seem like one long but never boring song. The music began in the 1970s but reached its commercial peak a decade later. It's still being played in and around D.C. but hasn't crossed over nationally, with the exception of E.U.'s lone hit single, "Da Butt."

Miller was certainly familiar with go-go, having written "Da Butt." So importing its rhythm into Davis's music was probably easy for him. Miles liked the go-go beat, telling an interviewer it reminded him of the swing of Max Roach and Kenny Clarke. Listen to Roach on "St. Thomas" from Sonny Rollins's *Saxophone Colossus*, or "Mildama," from the Clifford Brown/Max Roach Quintet's *Brown & Roach, Inc.* album, to hear the connection. Both these records, and lots of others dating back to the mid-1950s, lay the foundations of go-go in their funky brand of swinging hard bop.

Despite these positive qualities, *Amandla* is slightly disappointing on first hearing. It's a letdown to hear Miles pushing the mute back into place, after the bleeding-heart *cris de coeur* of *Music from Siesta*. Rhythms aside, the arrangements are less adventurous than those on either of the earlier Miller-Davis albums too. *Amandla* lacks *Music from Siesta*'s desolate air and replaces *Tutu*'s icy, cruel glare with a twinkle from behind oversized sunglasses.

It's not a total washout, of course. A few of the melodies are a bit thin, but the album's closer, "Mr. Pastorius," is one of Davis's finest performances of the 1980s. That piece, which features Miles's only open-horn soloing on *Amandla*, is a delicate ballad that opens with a weird synthesizer sound, like rain falling on a huge cymbal. Davis's trumpet is shadowed by bass clarinet and keyboards programmed to sound like an acoustic piano. After a minute or so, the bass and drums come in and begin to swing gently. The keyboard switches to a more obviously electronic, almost Kraftwerkian sound, and Miles solos at length. He abandons the short, emphatic phrases and amorphous squiggles that mark the rest of the album, and concentrates for the length of the track on really building a solo the way he did with his final acoustic quintet. For some reason, he's inspired towards the baroque rather than toward the simplistic blues/funk phrases he plays on every other *Amandla* cut. Periodically, as he solos, sampled voices sigh. More than once, dubby echoes swallow the end of a phrase. The notes vanish, but the bass and drums keep right on walking.

In contemporaneous live recordings, "Mr. Pastorius" was shorter but no less focused or beautiful. At a 1989 show released in the *Complete Miles Davis at Montreux 1973–1991* boxed set, many of the spacey effects are

gone, and the rhythm is even somewhat funkier than on the studio version. The keyboards are more overtly pianolike, and the whole band is locked in tight, swinging with tough-tender blues feeling. The human interaction is palpable.

By 1988, the keyboard sounds that had overshadowed the band were much more subtle and restrained. Listening now to live recordings from the end of the 1980s, you notice first how tight the band was. Sometimes it took them a number or two to lock in. The 1989 Montreux concert's opener, "Intruder," begins with staccato blasts of drums and synths that sound like straight steals from *Trouble Funk Live*, and it doesn't work. Moments later, though, Miles and the rest of the band, particularly dual bassists McCreary and Benny Reitveld, come together. The rest of the song is a ferocious funk groove that demands a physical response. Davis wanted the crowd on its feet from the first note.

The live versions of tracks from *Amandla* frequently improved on the studio originals. The funky basslines and go-go rhythms exploded off the stage, turning the band into a vehicle for some of the most larger-than-life, anthemic party music around at the time. The band was also playing with the African music known as zouk during this period, pushing that lyrical, loping groove through a post–James Brown filter and hitting every cue dead on the one. Miles, whose feel for the blues was matched only by his sense of space, crept through the band's nearly airtight jams like a cat burglar, spitting streams of sound like red and white showers of sparks when the mute was inserted, and like blue flame when it wasn't.

The same isn't true of the material from *Tutu*. Those songs made their artificiality a defining characteristic, and a virtue. The live musicians couldn't replicate the stiffness of the machines. They swung stuff that was supposed to click and hum, leeching away the spookiness of "Tutu" and "Full Nelson" and rendering them relatively pedestrian.

Miles was also featuring many compositions in his live sets that never made any studio album. Prince contributed some of these, and though three of them ("Jail Bait," "Penetration," and "A Girl and Her Puppy") were recorded in the summer of 1991, various lawyers have blocked their release. Rumor has it that battles over the Prince tunes were a major factor in scotching the release of a planned Rhino Records four-CD boxed set, *The Last Word: The Warner Bros. Recordings*, in 2002. The advance promotional CD-Rs of the box do not contain them.

Miles and Prince danced around doing an actual one-on-one collaboration for the last five years of the trumpeter's life. In his autobiography, Davis wrote of the younger man, "Prince is from the school of James Brown . . . but [he's] got some Marvin Gaye and Jimi Hendrix and Sly in him, even Little Richard. He's a mixture of all those guys and Duke Ellington." This

latter comment, expanded in the next paragraph to "For me, he can be the new Duke Ellington of our time if he just keeps at it," sent Stanley Crouch into paroxysms of rage in his infamous *New Republic* essay, "Play the Right Thing."

Prince isn't everything he's been cracked up to be, by Davis or by the numerous critics who've lionized him since his emergence at the end of the 1970s. He's recorded a few brilliant albums, most notably 1987's *Sign o' the Times*, but any honest observer would have to agree that his ability to spin out funk jams by the yard is more of a curse than a blessing. Like many highly productive artists, his quality control is a little off. He's reputed to have a vault containing hundreds, maybe thousands, of unreleased songs. But given the wild swings between brilliance and mediocrity—not just from album to album, but track to track—in his commercially available catalog, the prospect of someday digging through that backlog shouldn't fill anyone's heart with joy.

Davis was invited to Prince's Paisley Park complex for a New Year's Eve 1987/88 performance and party. He and Foley McCreary joined the band onstage for a version of "It's Gonna Be a Beautiful Night," which was recorded but never officially released. (Supposedly, it appears on a bootleg called *Driving to Midnight Mess*, which I haven't heard.) Prince also gave Miles a song called "Can I Play with U," which was recorded for *Tutu* but never used because it didn't fit the tone of the album. That song can be heard on the Prince bootleg *Crucial*.

The most ambitious Prince/Miles collaboration was meant to have come on *Doo-Bop*, Davis's final studio album. The original plan was to release a two-CD set, which would include reworkings of some 1985 sessions taped with a funk group known as the "Rubber Band" (some of these were to have appeared on the *Last Word* box), some of the tracks contributed by Prince, and a few other things. The second disc was to have been a hip-hop album, recorded with MC and producer Easy Mo Bee.

Easy Mo Bee wasn't a major figure in rap music; he didn't have the profile of guys like Rick Rubin, Marley Marl, or Pete Rock. He'd formed the group Rappin' Is Fundamental in about 1985. They signed with Def Jam but didn't release their only album, *The Doo-Hop Legacy*, until 1991. It wasn't a hit.

Rappin' Is Fundamental was a band playing guitar, keyboards, bass, and drums years before the Roots. The group's ideas about melding rap with earlier styles of black music were ahead of their time, and more than the hip-hop audience was willing to deal with at that moment. These days, there's a substantial nostalgist wing within the genre, but back then it was all about the newest thing. It didn't help that their vocal styles lacked the aggressiveness and grit popular at the time. Easy Mo Bee wasn't Ice Cube or Chuck D, and he didn't try to be. It would be fair, though, to compare him

with Guru of Gang Starr. The two have similar deep-voiced, deliberate, and somewhat monotone deliveries and cadences.

Though Rappin' Is Fundamental's commingling of hip-hop and live instrumentation was poorly suited to the pop charts at the time, it's likely that the combination was exactly what attracted Miles to Easy Mo Bee as a collaborator. This would have been his fourth straight album to be created by adding live instruments to synthesized, digital backing tracks, after all. And hiring Easy Mo Bee was consistent with Miles's pattern of working with promising newcomers.

Paul Chambers, Tony Williams, John McLaughlin, Mike Stern, Foley McCreary: All were relative unknowns, or low-profile players, at the time Davis hired them, and almost all went on to great success after having served with him. After *Doo-Bop*, Easy Mo Bee racked up an impressive list of production credits for rappers like Notorious B.I.G., Craig Mack, and many more, particularly those affiliated with the Bad Boy label. He also worked with non-rap artists like Alicia Keys and saxophonist Candy Dulfer, and released a solo album, *Now or Never: Odyssey 2000*.

Doo-Bop, somewhat predictably, got a chilly reception from critics upon its release. What may surprise some present-day listeners, though, is how wrong most of those naysayers were. *Doo-Bop* is a good album. Take away the three tracks with vocals, and it's a strong six-song EP.

Every time Miles invited a vocalist, or vocalists, onto one of his albums, the results were disheartening. Bob Dorough's crooning on "Nothing Like You" almost ruins *Sorcerer*. Luckily, it's the album's last track, so it's easily programmed away in the CD era. Randy Hall's song "The Man with the Horn" is the low point of that record. It's worse than the standard "Nothing Like You," because the Hall tune is a paean to Miles. So beyond being a below-average R&B tune, the listener is faced with the embarrassing prospect of imagining Miles Davis approving the insertion of a hymn to his glory into his comeback album. "The Doo-Bop Song," "Blow," and "Fantasy" are just as bad, if not worse. The beats are fine, but the rhymes are laughably wack.

Fortunately, the other six tracks are all solid. Each *Doo-Bop* song has its own flavor. The album begins with "Mystery," a track that's almost trip-hop (before there was any such term) and is reprised as a closer. Miles is in fine form, playing through a mute, dancing around the static rhythm, and actually seeming to give it life by infusing it with his own high levels of energy. It's exactly the kind of thing the best MCs do, creating the illusion that the looped groove they're rapping over is in fact a real-time interaction.

"Chocolate Chip" features echoey, muted horn over a massive drum loop that seems more suited to the music of an early-nineties industrial dance-rock act like KMFDM or Skinny Puppy than to hip-hop. A funk gui-

tar riff cuts through the air periodically, and a chanted vocal shows up a few times, never quite coming far enough forward in the mix to be comprehensible. This track may feature Miles less than any other on the album. He's one more element in the rhythmic collage, rather than the lead voice.

"High Speed Chase," on the other hand, really lets Miles shine. It lives up to its name, spinning out at nearly twice the tempo of anything else on *Doo-Bop*, whipping along until you can almost feel the wind in your hair. Automotive sound effects (revving engines, blaring horns) lead the cut in and out, and bolster the "streetscape" effect. Davis plays behind the beat, and only gets up to the same racetrack tempo as the backing track about half the time. A second horn shadows him, in a way that would be virtually impossible unless the two were reading off a score sheet.

Easy Mo Bee was offered the "Rubber Band" tracks as potential source material, because when Miles died, there wasn't enough new material to make up an album. "High Speed Chase" and "Fantasy" were therefore constructed posthumously, using solos Miles played during the 1985–86 sessions. (The use of a second horn gives the game away.) Ignoring such minor issues, of course, leaves the listener free to enjoy one of the most interesting and enjoyable tracks on the album.

"Sonya" points the way toward present-day "smooth jazz." The beat isn't very hard, except for the snare, which sounds like somebody whacking a trash can lid with a ping-pong paddle. The keyboards fill in the sound, emulating vibes and issuing long, slow chords the same way Miles had Adam Holzman and others do in his live shows. There's also a nice electric piano solo near the end.

"Duke Booty" features more instruments than any other track on the album. It's another fairly smooth outing, almost reminiscent of Steely Dan at a few points. Miles's horn is, again, muted and echoey, hovering in the middle of the mix like a ghost. Given the circumstances of the album's initial release, this sounds a little creepy, but time has softened the blow somewhat.

The album's finisher is a reprise of "Mystery," starting with dubbed-in applause. The basic theme is the same. Miles simply plays a few extra phrases that could have been part of the original tune, had it been stretched by ninety seconds or so. It brings the record full circle and implies cohesion within a project that was unfinished at the time of Miles's death.

Two singles, "The Doo-Bop Song" and "Blow," were released. Each contained remixes of the songs, in addition to the album versions. The "Doo-Bop Song" single offered two additional edits (four minutes long instead of five), one with the rapping and one without. The one without the rap still features the sung chorus, but it remains a marked improvement over the album version. There's also a totally unnecessary "instrumental edit," which omits both the rap *and* Miles's playing, leaving behind only the beat

and the chorus, on the off-chance a DJ wanted to mix a longer version of the song into a set.

The single of "Blow" is even more generous, offering eight remixes of the song, including a version with just the trumpet, nothing else. Some of these remixes, again, are better than the album version of the song.

I believe all of Miles's Warner Bros. albums can, and should, be understood as hip-hop records. *Doo-Bop* was not the beginning of a new shift in his sound; it was the culmination of one.

The albums Miles released before leaving Columbia, particularly *Decoy* and *You're Under Arrest*, betrayed his social and political views more clearly than at any earlier point in his career. He made them as he was coming to grips with his own existence as a mainstream celebrity, rather than "just" a jazz musician. They also contained his funkiest music since the mid-seventies, a funk built of synthesizers and electronic drums, staccato rather than fluid, but still funk—still the work of live musicians, interacting in real time.

As described above, *Tutu* was a whole different animal. Its grooves were mechanistic, almost punishing at times. Miles was the only human voice on some tracks, dancing through the hissing, bumping landscapes Marcus Miller constructed for him. Their partnership—Miller building the tracks, Davis asserting himself over them—was exactly the relationship between a rapper and a DJ/producer. Think of DMX barking over tracks (programmed drums and Casio keyboards, no samples) from Swizz Beatz, or Juvenile fronting Mannie Fresh's grimy machine rhythms.

Music from Siesta was more of the same but even more overtly hip-hop in execution. In this case, the parallel relationship is more akin to the RZA's with Method Man or Genius/GZA. Beats on *Tical* and *Liquid Swords*, highlights of the brilliant first wave of solo albums from Wu-Tang Clan members, were constructed out of minimalist samples from R&B records, coupled with harsh synth lines. In the same way, Miller sketched the Spanish atmosphere of *Music from Siesta* by taking the tiniest aural signifiers possible—a clattering castanet, a two- or three-note pattern of guitar notes, a whooshing desert wind—and placing them in rhythmic patterns. The effect is nearly subliminal, but it stacks up as the album rolls on. Just as hip-hop annexed the JBs' "The Grunt" or Lowell Fulson's "Tramp," turning songs that were seethingly alive into decontextualized and looped moments, Miller was after a feel, received and retransmitted by osmosis.

Amandla, though it featured more musicians in the studio, still found Miller doing most of the work. The more upbeat, less ambient tracks he constructed for that album were party anthems, influenced by world music and go-go, and in 1989, the album fit quite well into what turned out to be the waning days of danceable hip-hop. In 1990 and beyond, rappers and producers slowed down, increasingly influenced by weed. Pioneers like the

Sugar Hill Gang and the Furious Five, coming out of disco, weren't the models anymore. Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and Cypress Hill's B-Real and Sen Dog were the new, stoned spokesmen for the music. But in 1988 and 1989, hip-hop stars like Big Daddy Kane, Chubb Rock, and others released upbeat songs that packed dancefloors.

Miles wasn't aiming for hits, though. By that time, he'd largely given up on record sales. He wanted his albums to succeed, of course, but he recognized that the real money, and the real opportunity to shine artistically, was in touring. In more than one interview, he discussed his position that albums were basically vehicles to get people to the shows. This has always been a common sentiment in jazz circles, and at least in the case of *Amandla*, it's an accurate judgment of the worth of the record versus the live show, as discussed above. Further, it's worth noting that *Doo-Bop* didn't make any impact on the live show. It stands as a one-off project only partly because it's a posthumous release. It seems as if Miles was content to keep on playing upbeat funk and bluesy ballads in his live shows, and not incorporate hip-hop beats or rappers into those performances.

The only really weak albums Miles made during these years were two that weren't electric. As mentioned in Chapter 10, he recorded the soundtrack to the 1990 movie *Dingo*, in which he also acted. The music was composed by Michel Legrand—heavily orchestrated big-band tracks that weren't terrible but weren't very interesting, either.

The June 1991, Quincy Jones-conducted concert, at which Miles revisited the Gil Evans orchestrations of *Miles Ahead*, *Porgy & Bess*, and *Sketches of Spain* for the Montreux Jazz Festival, was also a little disappointing. Before the show, many had worried his lip wasn't in shape for the complex material, but that was mostly jazz snobbery at work. People who didn't consider his recent music to be on a par with his earlier albums told themselves he was playing that stuff because he couldn't play what they liked. This was a line they'd been feeding each other, and the world, since 1969.

The truth was that Miles's live shows at the end of the 1980s were among the most powerful of his career. His technique was as strong as it had ever been, and his range was actually wider than it had been in the 1950s. He had a new, and often astonishing, command of the trumpet's upper register, and a commitment to song form that was at times almost reminiscent of Louis Armstrong.

So, yeah, Miles's chops were more than up to the challenge of revisiting the music from the Evans albums. Wallace Roney, a younger player, sat next to him during the show, ready to take a solo in his place whenever necessary. He didn't have much to do. Davis rose to the occasion every time. The problem wasn't Miles, it was the material. Those albums are overrated, *Sketches of Spain* aside. So to hear him return to that era was not as

exciting as anticipated. Everything about the show (Disc 19 of the *Complete Miles Davis at Montreux 1973–1991* boxed set, and available separately as *Miles & Quincy Live at Montreux*) reeks of the demand for "events" that rules the world of jazz festivals.

There's always a competition, at festivals, to have some one-off collaboration or tribute to some late genius. The quality of the result is secondary to the bragging rights conveyed by presenting such a thing, and this concert was no different. There was no reason to revisit the 1950s. Miles understood this better than anyone, which made his acquiescence to nostalgia a puzzle. Some have speculated that he knew he was dying, and decided to give his older fans one last thrill. Others have averred that he wanted to go back because he himself was less enamored of his electric music than he had been. The latter theory is simply disrespectful.

In 1930, the painter Henri Matisse wrote,

> *The arts have a development which comes not only from the individual, but also from an accumulated strength, the civilization, which precedes us. One cannot just do anything. A talented artist cannot do just as he likes. If he used only his talents, he would not exist. We are not the masters of what we produce. It is imposed upon us.*

Some might argue that when Miles went electric, he did so in the face of this philosophy—that, by abandoning swing and acoustic instrumentation, he was asserting his inalienable right to "just do anything" and shrugging off the civilization that preceded him. Those same folks would likely argue that he was wrong to do so. I believe both these statements are inaccurate.

Miles never fully cut his ties to jazz. When he returned from self-imposed exile in 1981, he played "My Man's Gone Now" live. "Mr. Pastorius," from *Amandla*, is a lovely, swinging ballad that could have been recorded with an acoustic band without making any substantial changes to its arrangement. And, of course, there was the concert discussed directly above, and the *Dingo* soundtrack, and the *Hot Spot* soundtrack, and his appearance on Shirley Horn's album *You Won't Forget Me* . . . no, Miles Davis never walked away from jazz for good.

What he did was deny jazz's primacy at the top of America's cultural pyramid. This was his greatest crime, in his detractors' eyes. Jazz, which had begun its life as a soundtrack to drinking, dancing, and whoring, had already become art music by the 1940s. At the end of World War II, when the beboppers, who'd been woodshedding for years already, thrust their new ideas into the public square, jazz abandoned dancers for finger-poppers, drinkers for heroin addicts, and whores for proto-Beat coeds and poetesses.

That was just the beginning. The audience naturally dwindled, and rock 'n' roll didn't help matters any. By the mid-1950s, jazz, while still pop-

ular, was rapidly becoming an amusement for the intelligentsia. Davis saw marginalization coming a long way off, and he didn't like it. Not only because of its potential to damage his bank account, but also because of its impact on him as a black American.

Some say Miles was a race man. More than willing to employ talented white musicians, no question. But a race man nonetheless—"My People First," in writer Greg Tate's phrase. But this racial consciousness was inextricably bound up with his ego. He needed to be recognized not just as a black artist, but as an individual genius. So he set out to spread his brilliance through music that was more than just art.

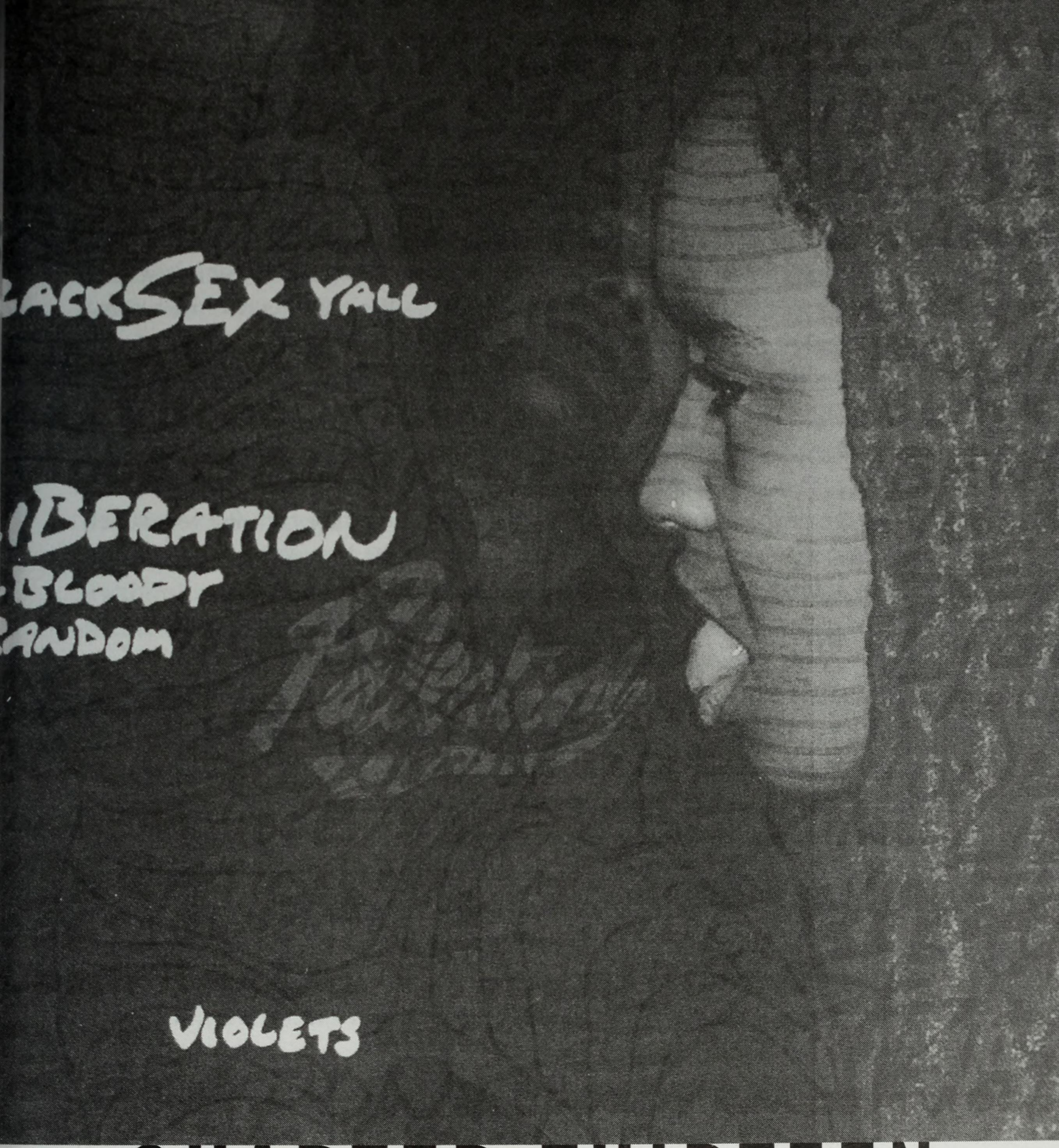
Schopenhauer wrote in *The World as Will and Idea* that

> *[t]he work of genius may be music, philosophy, painting, or poetry; it is nothing for use or profit. To be useless and unprofitable is one of the characteristics of works of genius; it is their patent of nobility. All other human works exist only for the maintenance and relief of our existence; only those here discussed do not; they alone exist for their own sake, and are to be regarded in this sense as the flower . . . of existence.*

It seems to me that this fundamentally false premise is the central tenet of too much jazz criticism. Music does not have to be "useless" or "unprofitable" to be brilliant, and I'm not talking about royalty checks. Music that creates social bonds, like gospel, is useful. Music like that is also profitable, in that its societal results are positive. Even music that's fundamentally social and recreational, that brings a community together to dance, is useful and profitable. And there's room for genius in all genres. Gospel, country, death metal, hip-hop, and funk all have their geniuses.

Miles understood that the potential for transcendence was as present in funk, and rock, and Indian music, and classical, as in jazz. And he recognized that jazz's ability to bring people together had effectively vanished. So he embarked on a new course, making some of the most adventurous and experimental music of the twentieth century and taking it to anyone and everyone who might possibly want to listen. So yes, he was doing just as he liked, *and* he was making music that was both useful, under the terms outlined above, and, by jazz standards, highly profitable.

This ability to transcend not only genres, but the mindsets that bind artists within them, was what made Davis the towering musical figure he was. And by combining jazz, funk, rock, Indian and African music, classical, and hip-hop into a singular and instantly recognizable instrumental voice, he made his electric music, in the final analysis, superior to what he'd done before. Miles was a superb jazz musician. But it was only by shattering the boundaries of jazz, remorselessly and without a backward glance, that his brilliance came to full flower.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN
POST-MILES

THERE'S NO DENYING THAT JAZZ entered a slump in the mid-seventies, at least in part because Miles Davis wasn't around to push it forward. Without him there to lead by restless example, lesser-known players huddled in place, playing to niche crowds. The NYC loft scene players explored the

outer reaches of their instruments' ranges, the fusion bands extruded mildly groovy lifestyle backing tracks, and the straight-ahead players eked out a living where they could. But nobody was really taking the music anywhere.

The music didn't come rocketing back to life the second Miles slunk back out of his apartment, blinking into the daylight, but it did eventually recover—somewhat. A lot of this was due to the arrival and near-immediate canonization of Wynton Marsalis. But when Miles announced his comeback shows, they sold out in moments, and press outlets that ordinarily shrugged off jazz with a yawn scrambled to get a piece of the action.

In the years since Davis's death, jazz hasn't died. In fact, it's very much alive. Record sales may be minuscule, but talent abounds. Almost every branch and tributary of the music is bubbling with life.

A clutch of avant-garde performers, many of whom spent the 1990s traveling further down the path carved by free jazz forefathers like Archie Shepp, Pharaoh Sanders, and Cecil Taylor, has now begun to incorporate electronics, up-to-date studio technology and methods, and yes, hip-hop beats into their music. Would this have happened, had Miles not gone this route first? Sure. Hip-hop is undeniable; it takes substantially more effort to ignore it than to find a way to use it. To deny the vast shadow Miles casts over this style of jazz even today, though, is foolish at best.

Traditional post-bop has continued unabated too. The innovations of Miles's final acoustic quintet are still being absorbed. At the same time, young performers like vibist Stefon Harris and pianist Jason Moran are finding ways to incorporate ideas from hip-hop and electronic music into acoustic jazz.

There are many performers whose debt to Miles's electric music is significant and obvious. Some play his tunes, while others merely acknowledge the influence of specific albums, or periods, on their own work. Many are creating music that defies genre assignment, much the way Miles's did. Not everything that can be described as following in his path does so explicitly. It would be disingenuous to declare any such genre as "post-Miles music." But most genre labels are embarrassingly vague, anyhow, so here are the links I hear.

An excellent place to begin charting the influence of Miles Davis's electric music is in the work of New York improvising ensemble Burnt Sugar. Formed by writer and guitarist Greg Tate in 1999, the group has recorded seven CDs' worth of material at this writing, plus two live albums, and in so doing is testifying to an expansive vision of musical "blacknuss," to use the late multi-instrumentalist Rahsaan Roland Kirk's term. Their music absorbs funk, reggae, electronica, jazz, rock, soul, hip-hop, heavy metal, and twentieth-century classical, and combines it all into a heady, psychedelic sonic trance, built on a foundation of thick, muddy basslines, that feels like it could go on forever.

Tate, a Howard University dropout born in Dayton, Ohio, is a Harlem resident and longtime staff writer at New York's *Village Voice* newspaper. He's the author of *Flyboy in the Buttermilk* and *Midnight Lightning: Jimi Hendrix and the Black Experience*, both of which informed parts of this book. He acknowledges that one particular Miles album was the catalyst for Burnt Sugar's genesis. In the summer of 1999, after years of listening to Davis, he had what he refers to as a *Bitches Brew* epiphany. The album finally opened itself to him, musically and methodologically, and he was inspired to start Burnt Sugar.

Bitches Brew wasn't the sole influence on the group's sound, of course. Funkadelic, the Bad Brains, the Band of Gypsys, Sun Ra's Arkestra, Mwandishi, and Material are just a few of the acts whose ideas can be heard percolating through Burnt Sugar's extended jams. Tate was also inspired by the conducted improvisations of Lawrence "Butch" Morris, a trumpeter who routinely gathered disparate players and forced them, with minimal advance preparation, to work outside their instrumental and stylistic comfort zones. In the notes to the group's first CD, Tate describes his role (he's the conductor) as

> *. . . akin to Mickey Mouse in the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" section of* Fantasia. *Diddling with forces he doesn't quite understand, snapping his fingers, opening the floodgates, occasioning a deluge. Drowning the room in the music of African ascent.*

This vision of African-American music as an impossibly deep pool into which bandmembers dive, resurfacing with one or another pearl, is at the center of Burnt Sugar the concept. The members of the collective include three guitarists (Morgan Michael Craft, Rene Akhan, and Kirk Douglass), pianist Vijay Iyer, keyboardist Bruce Mack, upright bassist Jason Di Matteo, electric bassist Jared Michael Nickerson, drummers Swiss Chris and Qasim Naqvi, and trumpeter Lewis "Flip" Barnes. A number of friends and special guests also appear throughout the group's six releases to date, providing whatever a given piece demands. Not all these folks are black, but all understand the territory they're exploring.

The group's first release, 2000's *Blood on the Leaf*, set the tone for what was to come, starting with its title, taken from the antilynching anthem "Strange Fruit." Song titles included "Beloved," "A Blood Sample from Errol Garner" and "Steals a Kiss from the Merman," the latter a reference to Jimi Hendrix's "1983 . . . (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)," from *Electric Ladyland*. Some pieces were under ninety seconds long, others nudged the fourteen-minute mark, but the album was actually a solid suite of music, a journey through sepia-toned night landscapes.

Burnt Sugar doesn't usually play fast or go over the top. Their two bassists (the basslines are the only things established in advance) create a dubby, bluesy churn that the drummers ornament. The guitarists riff but hardly ever solo in any extravagant, showboating way. Tate has said that the point is to get people to play against their instincts, to disrupt their usual ways of thinking. Even if someone only plays two notes, their contribution remains vital to the whole, is his theory, and *Blood on the Leaf* bears it out. From beginning to end, it simmers but never boils.

Though well received, *Blood on the Leaf* has been only narrowly available. The group has chosen to self-release all its material, rather than sign with a label. But they don't even sell their own CDs directly; instead, their website, www.burntsugarindex.com, only lists other sites, and brick-and-mortar record stores (most of them in Manhattan), where the albums *are* available. Tate's explanation is that, given his own status as a critic prior to forming the group, he wanted to demonstrate total commitment, rather than risk having the albums shrugged off as mere dilettantism. Bassist Nickerson acts as manager, keeping the money flowing in (for example, arranging for the group to receive funding from Arts International's DNA Project and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation) and lining up gigs.

Burnt Sugar followed *Blood on the Leaf* with a truly epic statement, releasing *That Depends on What You Know*, Vols. 1, 2 and 3, simultaneously. The discs—subtitled *The Sirens Return/Keep It Real 'til It Flatlines*, *The Crepuscularium*, and *Fubractive Since Antiquity Suite*, respectively—exhibited a new musical depth while paying tribute to some of their influences. The first disc included a version of Jimi Hendrix's "Castles Made of Sand," the second a take on Curtis Mayfield's "If There's a Hell Below (We're All Gonna Go)," and the third a reading of Thelonious Monk's "Round About Midnight," intermingled with their own vamps, poems, and improvisations. The title track of *Fubractive Since Antiquity Suite*, a salute to trumpeter Lester Bowie, expanded on the Art Ensemble of Chicago's ideas about black music as a continuum, within which all styles were equally worthy of exploration and celebration. Splattery Bowie-esque trumpet bleats mingled, throughout the thirty-five-minute piece, with post-Hendrix guitars and thundering African-derived percussion.

Naturally, once you've immersed yourself in black music like a life-giving bath, there's no place left to go but straight to the heart of the twentieth-century classical avant-garde. Burnt Sugar's 2003 dispatch was *The Rites*, a series of improvisations around themes and ideas from Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. This disc featured three major guest performers: bassist Melvin Gibbs, guitarist Pete Cosey, and conductor Lawrence "Butch" Morris.

The record is hardly a straightforward run-through of the piece. Bits of melody, sampled on turntables, inspire the band to great heights. *The Rites*

feels statelier than any other Burnt Sugar album. It's not particularly funky, or sprawlingly extroverted the way the four previous CDs are. Even Pete Cosey, who roared like a dragon with a live powerline for a tail when he was with Miles, holds himself in check, relatively speaking. Still, it's never a boring album, and some who've followed Burnt Sugar's evolution cite it as their favorite of the group's works.

The most recent Burnt Sugar studio release, at this writing, is a two-CD set with the somewhat unwieldy title of *Black Sex Yall Liberation & Bloody Random Violets*. It's a sharp left turn for the group, in every respect. Where previous albums had brown or sepia-tone covers, *Black Sex* sports a purple sleeve with images of black women's bodies, like those that illustrated A Tribe Called Quest's *The Low End Theory*. The music is different too. DJ Mutamassik, an Egyptian woman, takes a lead role for the first time. She remixes tracks from *The Rites*, and her turntables provide many of the set's most evocative passages. On the other hand, *Black Sex* contains some of Burnt Sugar's most aggressive, almost metallic songs, particularly an arrangement of Max Roach's "Driver Man/Freedom Day," which pairs blues choruses with spastic drum 'n' bass beats. It's the band's most produced album, less concerned with maintaining the organic feel of earlier releases than with hitting the listener full force. *Black Sex* also makes the connection between Burnt Sugar's music and Miles's more explicit than ever before, with a version of "Mtume," from *Get Up With It*. The band's sound has always been closer to early-seventies Miles than to *Bitches Brew*. "He Loved Him Madly," with its slow buildup and organic melancholy, is much more obviously an influence on them than the hell-for-leather swirl of, say, "Pharaoh's Dance," and *Black Sex* admits that debt.

Guitarist Henry Kaiser and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith explore the sound of early-seventies Miles even further. Back in 1998, the pair collaborated on *Yo Miles!*, a reinterpretation of Davis's 1970–75 music. They gathered some of the best players on the fringes of out rock and avant-garde jazz, including guitarists Nels Cline and Elliott Sharp, saxophonist Oluyemi Thomas, the ROVA Saxophone Quartet, bassist Michael Manring and organist John Medeski, among others. The ensemble (nineteen players in all, though not everyone played on every track) arranged versions of songs from *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, *On the Corner*, *Big Fun*, *Get Up With It*, *Dark Magus*, and *Agharta*. They also recorded "Miles Dewey Davis III—Great Ancestor," a new Smith piece. In the spirit of the source material, *Yo Miles!* was a sprawling double disc, containing nearly three hours of music.

Kaiser plays most of the lead guitar on the album. He tears up the fretboard, possessed by the spirit of Pete Cosey and supported by the fluid rhythm work of bassist Manring, drummers Wally Ingram and Lukas Ligeti, and the keyboards. At times, the soloing gets so unfettered, the groove so

slamming, that it's almost more reminiscent of the Allman Brothers Band than of Miles. Almost.

Smith's trumpet is electrified on only a single track. He doesn't ape Miles in his playing, preferring to preserve his own bleary, smeared style. Smith is a founding member of Chicago's AACM and a Rastafarian. The intellectually rarefied experimentalism of the former, and the spirituality of the latter, combines to make him a unique trumpet voice, akin to the Art Ensemble of Chicago's Lester Bowie but thoroughly himself. He sputters and soars all over the discs.

The group stretches some tracks, like "Ife" and "Themes from Jack Johnson" (which incorporates both "Right Off" and "Yesternow"), past the half-hour mark, but boredom never sets in. The use of High Definition (HDCD) technology gives *Yo Miles!* a rich, full sound too, even superior to some of the thinly mixed live albums like *Agharta*, *Pangaea*, and *In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall*. It's a throbbing, screamingly alive record, much more than some rote run through jazz repertory.

In 2004, Kaiser and Smith released a second double-disc, *Yo Miles: Sky Garden*. This album featured interpretations of material from 1969 and 1970, and was consequently more relaxed and groovy than its predecessor. Lengthy, aggressive guitar solos and screaming trumpet runs still abounded, but there were also many percussive interludes and oceanic keyboard swirls, in the spirit of *Bitches Brew* and *In a Silent Way*.

There's one major change on *Sky Garden*: The band has apparently taken on its own life since the first record. Two of the tracks on *Sky Garden* are medleys: "Sivad/Gemini/Double Image/Little Church" and "It's About That Time/The Mask." This fact alone is instructive: Miles's music is a springboard on this sophomore release, but it's no longer the whole picture. This is both a strong point and a weakness. On *Yo Miles!*, there was only one Smith composition, and it hewed closely to the seventies Miles template. On *Sky Garden*, Davis's tunes make up just over half of the tracks—five out of eleven, six if you count Joe Zawinul's "Directions," which is obviously identified with Miles in most folks' minds. The others are a mixture of Smith pieces and collective improvisations credited to the group.

Some of these retain the feel of Miles's music, but some simply don't. "Who's Targeted?", for instance, is a long, funky blues jam that, rather than retain the trance feel of *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*, goes for more of a Santana-meets-Mwandishi feel. (Much of this is due to the presence of keyboardist and former Santana member Tom Coster, who takes a long solo on the track.)

"Miles Star" is more spacious and sparse, with lots of spotlight time for Smith's trumpet. He plays a lot more notes than Miles would have in the same space, though, and that encourages the listener to forget that this

album was inspired by Davis's electric music—at that point, *Sky Garden* becomes just another retro-sounding electronic jazz session. One thing makes "Miles Star" interesting, though, and that's the presence of guest guitarist David Creamer. He came out of nowhere in 1972, appeared on the second half of *On the Corner,* and disappeared again. His contribution to "Miles Star" isn't mind-blowing; his return is more like the answer to a trivia question than anything else. Other guests, particularly saxophonists Greg Osby and John Tchicai, take impressive solos on *Sky Garden*'s two discs, though.

One of the most frustrating tracks on *Sky Garden* is a thirty-five-minute "Great Expectations." The original version, recorded shortly after *Bitches Brew* and released on *Big Fun,* wasn't a high point of Miles's catalog. Based around a repetitive trance figure, anchored by a droning sitar, it sounded like a loop and featured little improvisatory development. Smith and Kaiser have dropped the looping feel, and with it gone, there's very little left. Their version is nearly twice as long as Miles's, and it begins with a lengthy percussion solo before launching into a desultory reading of the melody. The piece becomes a series of solos, drifting over minimal backing, and it feels endless.

An interesting aspect of all three Kaiser/Smith releases is their exploration of rare, unfamiliar Davis music. *Yo Miles!* begins with "Big Fun/Hollywuud," a medley combining the A and B sides of an extremely rare 45 Miles released in 1973 to almost no notice and which has never been reissued on any CD. Another track, "Agharta Prelude," is based on studio recordings that were never officially released, until they were edited into "Agharta Prelude Dub," a track constructed by producer Bill Laswell on the 1999 compilation *Panthalassa*.

Sky Garden also contains versions of tracks that remained unreleased during the 1970s. "The Mask," for example, emerged only on the *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* box in 2003, and "Jabali," which is separated into two parts, one on each disc, doesn't appear on any Davis record. As if the mere existence of this project wasn't proof enough of Kaiser's and Smith's devotion to the music, the presence of such lost tracks, only available on bootlegs if at all, certainly hammers the point home. And both releases are very much worth hearing. *Yo Miles!* is better than *Sky Garden,* because it's harder-rocking and less amorphous than the follow-up. But *Sky Garden* has better artwork.

In early 2005, a third volume, *Upriver,* emerged. This one found the group diving heavily into themes and riffs from *On the Corner*. It was a more aggressive release than Sky Garden, but the cleanliness of the mix kept it from being as anarchic or shocking as its source material.

Trumpeter Tim Hagans imported up-to-date rhythms into jazz, and combined jazz with electronic music to create something entirely new, on

his 1999 album *Animation-Imagination* and its 2000 follow-up, *Re-Animation Live!* Hagans is a power trumpeter, more similar in attack to Lee Morgan or Freddie Hubbard than to Miles. In fact, he recorded *Hubsongs*, an album of Hubbard songs, with fellow trumpeter Marcus Printup in 1998. But on the two electronic albums, he abandoned hard bop for hardcore drum 'n' bass. His band featured a DJ alongside a saxophonist, an electric bassist, and a keyboardist. For the most part, *Animation-Imagination* is a breakneck sprint. A track or two are played at simmering funk tempi, but from the opening track "The Real Drum 'n' Bass," it's all about making breakbeats swing.

Rhythm is vital to *Animation-Imagination*'s power, and as much of it rests in the hands of drummer Billy Kilson as with the two DJs, Kingsize and Smash. Kilson is a powerhouse, whose prejazz background was in funk and rock. He hits hard and fast, interacting equally with the sampled rhythms and the band. The dialogue between Hagans and Kilson is what makes the album burn. In the liner notes, Hagans talks about being consistently disappointed with drummers who play frantically behind saxophonists but settle into a swinging bop groove during the trumpet solo, as though the Clifford Brown/Max Roach Quintet provided the only available paradigm. Kilson, by contrast, keeps the intensity level high, and Hagans rises to the challenge, even literally screaming through the horn on "Trumpet Sandwich."

Producer Bob Belden, who also plays soprano saxophone on the album, is as much a part of its sound as Hagans or the rest of the band. He's also overseen the remastering of many Miles albums from the 1970s, as well as the *In a Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew*, and *Jack Johnson* boxed sets. While the vision behind *Animation-Imagination* was primarily Hagans's, Belden's loose, no-holds-barred approach to production did much to shape the final album. He had the DJs bring in prerecorded rhythms on laptops, but they were then required to interact in real time with the band, thus preserving an improvisatory, organic feel.

Despite this, the impression, upon *Animation-Imagination*'s release, was that the record was as much a studio creation as *Bitches Brew* or *On the Corner*. There was also some doubt that the musicians involved would be able to translate such processed, process-driven music into a live context. All that was wiped away when *Re-Animation Live!* was released, a year later. That album documented, with no *ex post facto* tweaking, the group's first live show, at the 1999 Montreal Jazz Festival.

Re-Animation Live! is cocredited to Tim Hagans and Bob Belden. This is probably a grandfathering of recognition for the degree of creative input he had on the studio album. At the concert, he's a sideman, playing soprano saxophone—and not much of that, given that he'd suffered a serious shoulder injury sometime earlier. He's audibly playing through the pain, with the same anguished, panting sound that Miles had on *Agharta* and *Pangaea*.

The other bandmembers, though, are playing at full strength, and feeling aggressive. Billy Kilson sounds like a methed-up metal drummer, battering the kit almost as fast as the drum 'n' bass beats Kingsize is firing off from his turntables. The two mesh their rhythms seamlessly, until it's occasionally hard to tell who's playing what.

The live versions of the pieces mostly don't differ that much from the studio versions. Occasionally, they're a little more obstreperous, but the existence of the live album seems mostly about proving that such a thing could be done. Sad, that it needed proving to jazz fans, but exhilarating for listeners, and certainly for the audience that was present.

The one track that's about twice as exciting on the live album as it was in its studio incarnation is "Are You Threatening Me?" This song breaks down into a bass solo, all lightning-quick thumb-popping worthy of Larry Graham driving Sly Stone's band in 1970. It makes you suck your breath in and not let it out again until the solo's over. That's rare enough, in any music, that its occurrence on *Re-Animation: Live!* recommends ownership all by itself.

The Hagans-Belden band dissolved after these two records, but the trumpeter was invited to Scandinavia to guest on an album of electric Miles compositions. The hosting group, the UMO Orchestra, was a big band that had arranged the pieces for their own instrumentation. That, coupled with the catholicism of their selections (it includes a take on "Chocolate Chip," from *Doo-Bop*), makes the album, *Electrifying Miles*, well worth picking up. Hagans is in blazing form throughout, as is guest guitarist Raoul Björkenheim. The UMO players and their guests transform the source material into something just as amazing as the originals, but also wholly their own.

In my opinion, Miles wouldn't be playing this kind of music, had he lived. By the time *Animation-Imagination* was released, he'd have been seventy-three, and the simple fact is that time would have taken its toll on his skills. However, the music on these three records, the former two in particular, does, to my ear, represent an evolution beyond Miles's music. The importation of drum 'n' bass rhythms is a natural next step from the funk, rock and hip-hop rhythms that Miles embraced during his last years, just as drum 'n' bass was an outgrowth of funk, constructed from sped-up, looped breakbeats.

Yet even as music draws from his innovations and expands on his concepts, Miles is still almost as present as he was during his lifetime. He recorded an awe-inspiring amount of material, much of which remains unreleased to this day. Even when he was alive, his profligacy presented "problems." For years, Miles's catalog was a nightmare for anyone attempting to assess his work chronologically. Every time he changed labels, from Prestige to Columbia to Warner Bros., his former home issued compilations and scoured the archives in an attempt to stay in the game. Columbia did this several times during his late-seventies hiatus, putting out *Circle in the*

Round, *Water Babies*, and *Directions*, each of which featured material that was at least five and sometimes twenty or more years old. *Big Fun*, released in 1974 as a new album, contained pieces recorded as far back as 1969—at least three bands old, by that point.

In the years since his death, the situation's stayed almost as chaotic. Albums are reissued with bonus tracks, and boxed sets crammed with alternate takes and cutting-room-floor detritus come out at the rate of one per year, minimum. In 2003, Columbia offered two major boxes—*The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* and *The Complete Friday and Saturday Nights at the Blackhawk*, which expanded two live albums from 1960 into four CDs of modal hard bop. Warner Bros., for their part, released the mammoth, twenty-disc *The Complete Miles Davis at Montreux 1973–1991*. Had that musical monolith been split up into ten double-disc live albums, it would have forced a reassessment of Miles's 1980s music. But in its existing form, it was too expensive for most consumers to go near, and that's a shame.

Most jazz fans greeted the boxes showcasing late-sixties/early-seventies material with excitement. Some folks weren't happy with them, though, Teo Macero in particular. He had nothing good to say about *The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions* and *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions*, claiming that Miles would never have wanted his music to have its guts, its component parts, exposed. This may well be true. So perhaps *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* in particular exists more as a study aid than a source of entertainment. So what? That's not an argument against its existence.

My dispute with *The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions* and *The Complete In a Silent Way Sessions* is that they're misnamed. They do *not* contain the hours upon hours of jamming, from which Miles and Teo culled the final albums. Instead, they offer finished tracks recorded at more or less the same time as the albums that give the boxes their titles. This serves to divide Miles's discography into periods, discrete stages of development during which particular ideas are raised, explored, and then discarded. Unfortunately, this process of division is somewhat inaccurate too.

The ideas at the center of *In a Silent Way*, and those underpinning *Bitches Brew*, are *not* explored further on the other tracks in the boxes. *The Complete In a Silent Way Sessions* gathers tracks from *Filles de Kilimanjaro*, *Directions*, and *Circle in the Round*. Most of these find Miles investigating R&B grooves and replacing the acoustic piano with an electric one, but they don't feature the repetitive trancelike rhythm, or the tape editing as creative tool, that were the major innovations on *In a Silent Way*, the album.

Similarly, *The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions* contains music made in late 1969 and early 1970, but it does *not* feature chunks of raw tape from the August 1969 sessions that produced the titular album. And, again, the other tracks are of a totally different tone from the *Bitches Brew* material.

Live, late 1980s

None of it is as heavily, or obviously, processed as that music, none of it features driving rock rhythms to the same degree, and there are elements present on the non-*BB* tracks that are not part of that album. The most notable of these is the introduction of Indian instruments, but the droning, loop-like structure of "Great Expectations" is another important innovation, even if it's not a positive change.

The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions is another matter. It's the one box that fulfills the promise of its predecessors, at last revealing Davis's working methods. There are whole unreleased tracks on its five CDs, but the main selling point, for critics and hardcore fans, is the presence of the fragments that were later assembled into album side-long tracks like "Right Off," "Yesternow," and "Go Ahead John." This, the very thing that Macero

objects to—as would any magician who learned his tricks were being given away—is what makes the set worth owning. It's what many were disappointed they didn't find in the first two boxes.

The boxes haven't been the only posthumous trip to the well either. In 1999, bassist/producer Bill Laswell was asked to assemble *Panthalassa,* a four-part suite culled from his 1969–74 recordings. He was allowed the run of Columbia's vaults, and found so much material he talked in a few interviews about assembling a six-CD box out of just the tapes from the *On the Corner* sessions of summer 1972.

Panthalassa gets its title from the name for the one ocean that surrounded Pangaea, itself named after the one land mass that later split into the continents as they currently exist. It flows like a river. Three of its four tracks are medleys; the fourth is a thirteen-minute edit of "He Loved Him Madly." The second medley, "Black Satin/What If/Agharta Prelude Dub," is the most interesting. Laswell's remix of the *On the Corner* track requires careful listening to distinguish it from the original, but it *is* different. He retains the melody but removes some of the keyboard drones and shifts the multiple layers of percussion around, making them less deliberately disorienting and more like traditional funk rhythms.

The second and third movements of the suite, "What If" and "Agharta Prelude Dub," are previously unreleased. The former piece barely features Miles at all; it's a showcase for Pete Cosey. He's playing some of the noisiest, raunchiest Funkadelic-style guitar in the whole Davis catalog, much closer to his work on Muddy Waters's 1968 *Electric Mud* album than the post-Hendrixian pyrotechnics of 1974 and 1975. The beat behind him, probably looped by Laswell, is practically hip-hop. "Agharta Prelude Dub" is built around the horn riffs that open *Agharta,* but laid over a dub bassline. It works, but it sounds more like Laswell than Miles—the only time in all of *Panthalassa* where that happens.

The third and fourth tracks are both taken from *Get Up With It.* Track three is a medley of "Rated X" and "Billy Preston" that doesn't quite work. It blunts the former track's edge by putting Miles's stabbing organ in the back, and inserting some additional, more atmospheric keyboards, and some echoey tablas, into the mix. "Billy Preston" is a more conventionally funky piece and thus more suited to Laswell's concepts. But it's played at about half the tempo of "Rated X," so the combination is jarring. It seems like Laswell had the idea of creating four long medleys, and mulishly pushed ahead with it even when the tracks he chose had little or nothing to do with each other. A suite featuring "Billy Preston" and "Mtume," "Go Ahead John," or even "Ife" would have been much better. "Rated X" is just too aggressive to mix with any other track in Miles's oeuvre.

Panthalassa closes with a thirteen-minute edit of "He Loved Him Madly." It was a good idea to cull the high points of the half-hour-long track and make it something a casual fan can listen to without being emotionally and spiritually overwhelmed. The original is an epic poem of desolation that can only be listened to, in depth, once or twice a year. Laswell's version, while still melancholy, features the rhythm instruments more prominently in the mix. Michael Henderson's bass and Al Foster's drums are no longer a subsonic rumble and a rattle from the corner, respectively; they're pushing the track forward, turning it into something like the head-nodding hip-hop of the Roots. It's an interesting demonstration of how Miles could have made his 1970s material more commercial, had he so chosen, but it *does* lose much of the icy despair of the original. *Panthalassa*, as a whole, feels like Laswell's painted a smiley face over Miles's customary scowl. The real man is still visible underneath, but there's been an attempt at revisionism. And while there are plenty of good reasons to check the album out, there's no reason to listen to it before thoroughly investigating the source material.

Panthalassa—The Remixes followed the initial album, less than a year later. Tracks were handed off to various drum 'n' bass DJs, and Laswell. None of the other remixers were big names outside the electronic dance music genre, and only a few of them turned in tracks worth listening to more than once or twice.

"Rated X" is the subject of two reworkings, one by Doc Scott and the other by Jamie Myerson. Neither creates anything nearly as impressive as the original. With its punishing, avalanche-like rhythm, "Rated X" seems like drum 'n' bass *avant la lettre*, but supplementing it with clichéd breakbeats actually saps its demonic energy. Doc Scott barely takes anything from the original, laying a half-second-long chunk of guitar as a looped sample, over a routine jungle break and taped applause. Any listener attracted to the idea of a remixed "Rated X" will be disappointed with what Scott has to offer.

Myerson's take on the piece is a little more interesting. He retains the fundamental rhythm, and punches in additional keyboards and percussion, turning it into as dancefloor-friendly a version of itself as possible. It's still not great, and it's hardly the bug-eyed, bilious assault Davis's original was, but if it was mixed into a drum 'n' bass DJ set, somebody would probably notice. That's more than can be said for Scott's take.

DJ Cam's reworking of "In a Silent Way," which lays Miles's trumpet solos from the album over fractured hip-hop breaks, is okay if you're a hip-hop fan, but it does a disservice to the source material, making him sound like just any overly "cool" trumpeter blowing over mellow beats. Only two

tracks on *Panthalassa: The Remixes* do anything really respectable (not necessarily respectful) with Davis's music. DJ Krush, of Japan, dissects "In a Silent Way" too, scratching it up and letting the beats seep slowly into the music. His own tracks have always been possessed of a deep calm, and he brings that to bear on this cut.

Bill Laswell's "Subterranean Channel Remix" of *On the Corner* takes all four tracks from that album and compresses them into a sixteen-minutes-plus medley. Since the last three tracks from the album were all built around a single rhythm anyway, this isn't as jarring as the bassist's combinations of cuts on *Panthalassa*. But this truncated version has a much blunter edge than the original, and Laswell seems particularly fixated on "Black Satin," returning again and again to its admittedly hypnotic, looped melodic figure. More energy is sapped from the track because of his heavy reliance on low-end rumble and additional, superfluous drones.

The most interesting track on *Panthalassa—The Remixes*, and the only one that really makes the album worth seeking out, is the album opener, "Shhh (Sea4 Miles Remix)," by King Britt and Philip Charles. Unlike all the other remixes except Laswell's, it respects Miles's own concepts. The track is dance-friendly, but retains the feel of the original. *Panthalassa—The Remixes* is not a recommended Miles Davis purchase. It won't sour anybody who hears it without having first experienced the original versions of the selections, but one good track out of five (the DJ Krush mix is only on the vinyl version) doesn't justify seeking it out.

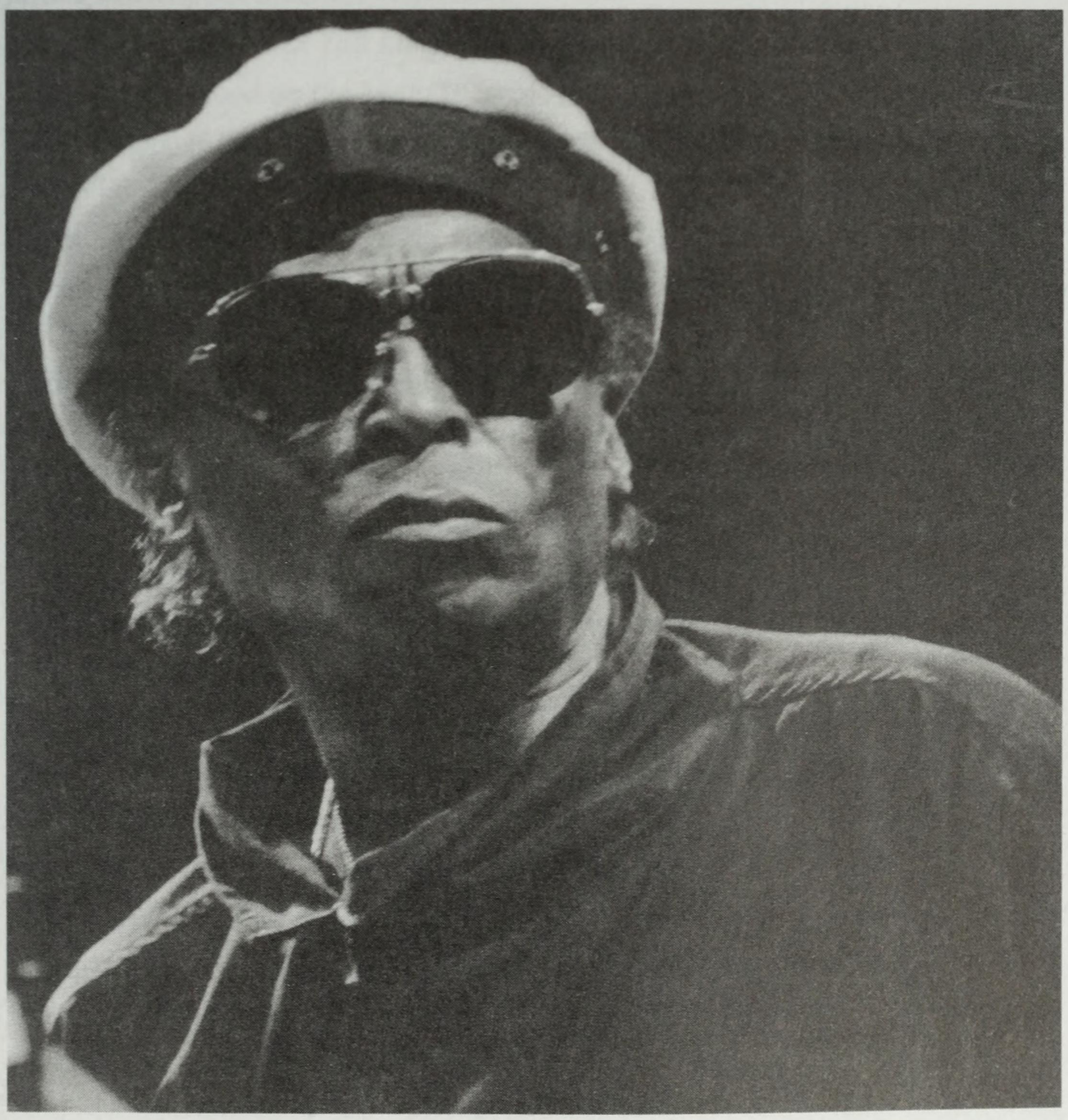
The question "What would Miles be doing if he was still alive?" is impossible to answer. *Doo-Bop* could have been a one-off, and he might have continued to play glossy funk and drawn-out ballads for the rest of his life. Given that he'd be about eighty by now, another radical change between 1991 and 2004 would have been highly unlikely.

As Miles aged, the rate of change in his music slowed. Between 1968 and 1971, he shuffled bandmembers frantically, made records that sounded nothing like each other, and kept everyone—critics, fans, fellow musicians—on their toes, anxiously awaiting his next move. Then, from 1972 to 1975, he embarked on a journey into the heart of a particular sound. Studio experimentation went by the wayside for the most part, as his funk-rock septet spent three years on the road.

Upon returning from self-imposed exile, Miles decided on the sound he wanted to explore for the foreseeable future. He stuck with funk, but stripped it down and made it more melodic than it had been in the seventies. And while the band lineup changed frequently, but the sound didn't, much. Once Miles found the sweet spot of his sound, he stuck with it for over a decade—something which was unprecedented in his electric music to that point.

It hardly matters, though, what the next thing would have been, because there is no next thing. Miles belongs to the past now. No matter how assiduously the labels for which he recorded scour their vaults, eventually the backlog of unreleased material will run out. No matter what gets released, it's unlikely that our understanding of Miles's music will be fundamentally altered. There is no major phase that remains hidden from us. Certainly, this or that live album can shed a little more light on specific periods—an extra concert or two by the 1969 electric quintet would be nice, and fans will surely be justifiably overjoyed now that Columbia has finally gotten around to releasing the six CDs of material from the Cellar Door club in Washington, D.C, in December 1970.

The point is, though, it's up to living musicians to pick up the music of Miles Davis and run with it. Mortality released his ideas from his grasp in 1991. Now they travel the universe like spores, filtering into the work of living performers. Miles is gone—music continues.



DISCOGRAPHY

The following albums are discussed in this book or fall into line with the themes discussed in this book. Most of them are by Miles Davis, obviously, but each relates to the subject at hand, and listening to them will help you hear the others differently.

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Return To Forever, *No Mystery* (Polygram)

Return To Forever, *Romantic Warrior* (Columbia/Legacy)

Return To Forever, *Where Have I Known You Before* (Polygram)

Akira Sakata, *Fisherman's.com* (Starlets'/Dogtail)

Devadip Carlos Santana/Turiya Alice Coltrane, *Illuminations* (Columbia/Legacy)

Devadip Carlos Santana/Mahavishnu John McLaughlin, *Love Devotion Surrender* (Columbia/Legacy)

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Sly and the Family Stone, *Fresh* (Columbia)

Sly and the Family Stone, *Stand!* (Columbia)

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UMO Jazz Orchestra, *Electrifying Miles* (Challenge)

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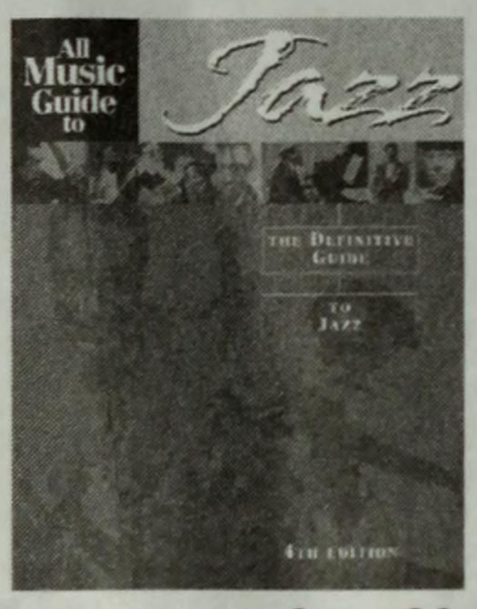

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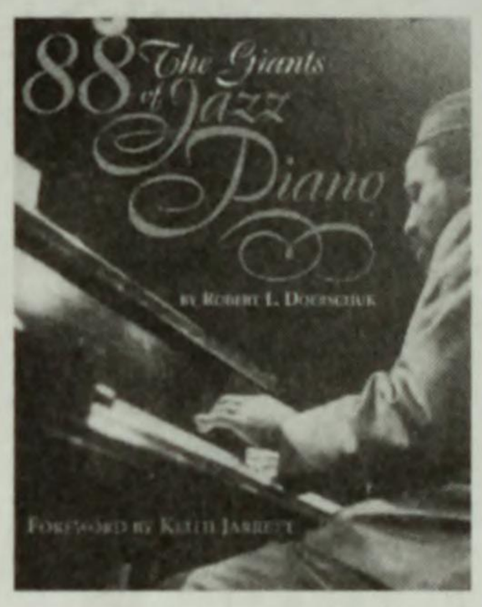

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Philip Freeman's writing on jazz, metal, and other music has been published in numerous magazines and newspapers, including *Jazziz*, *The Village Voice*, *The Wire*, *The Cleveland Scene*, *Down Beat*, *Alternative Press*, *Revolver*, and *Metal Hammer*. He lives in New Jersey.

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